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ALL THAT WAS POSSIBLE

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BEING THE RECORD OF A
SUMMER IN THE LIFE OF
MRS. SIBYL CROFTS, COMEDIAN

EXTRACTED FROM HER
CORRESPONDENCE

BY

HOWARD OVERING STURGIS

AUTHOR OF "TIM" //

LONDON

OSGOOD, McILVAINE & CO.

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TO THE
AMERICAN

**THIS BOOK IS DEDICATED
TO THOSE FRIENDS WITHOUT
WHOSE ENCOURAGEMENT
IT WOULD NEVER HAVE BEEN
PUBLISHED + + + +**

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ALL THAT WAS POSSIBLE

LETTER I

EBURY STREET, *March 7th*, 188-.

DEAR MILLY,

You are about the only person I can think of at the moment who cares enough about me to want to know what has become of me, and as I feel in a mood for writing to some one and for chattering about myself, there seems to be no escape for you. You needn't read my letter if you don't like, but I feel as though it would do me good to write it, and I like somehow to think it is to you, though I daresay I shall tear it up when it's finished.

A

You have probably seen in the Society papers the "approaching marriage in high life of the Earl of Medmenham to Lady Florence Marlowe," and perhaps have wondered what would become of me under those circumstances. Several other people I find have been wondering the same thing, including George himself. You would have been sorry for him (I was) if you had been present on the occasion of his breaking the news to me. The poor fellow was so grateful to me for what he called "taking it so well" that I think he would have there and then settled anything on me for life that I had chosen to ask. The fact is I am amazed myself to find how little I care. George had evidently braced his nerves for a scene: his ideas are still painfully crude on many subjects: I was to have hysterics, or

indulge in the lofty heroic style; indeed I don't quite know what he expected me to do, but his apprehensions were evidently none the less awful for being vague. I almost wish I *was* more affected by this event: I am afraid I must have grown callous; but (I am writing to you as to my other self) I confess the idea of a change of life is not unpleasant to me. Breathe it not in Gath, and had he so willed, I would have done my best to have prevented his finding it out, but I find it impossible to disguise from myself that George had begun to bore me. What do people do, I wonder, who are married, when they make this discovery? Does that awful half-hour in church make such a *dénouement* impossible? I went to a wedding the other day (not as a guest, but in the gallery among the spectators) to see

what it was George had got to go through, and I came to the conclusion that people were very courageous. However, as I say, if he hadn't found out he was tired first, and, with the accustomed selfishness of his sex, taken steps to remove the burthen, I doubt if I should ever have had the heart to inflict the pain on him, which he no doubt fully believed he was going to inflict on me. I hear a ring at the bell and must stop : perhaps I will go on later.

Who do you think my visitor was? Old Prossett, come to offer me untold gold if I would return to the theatre ; I was to have leading parts, and every sort of advantage. "Why, Mr. Prossett," I said, "you never thought so much of me in old days : and now I am out of practice. My voice would require all sorts of training to

get back its timbre, and I have quite forgotten how to dance: besides I am five years older, and not near so good-looking."

"Ah," said the old wretch, "but *then* you were nobody. *Now* you would be a celebrity."

So you see female virtue is not at a premium. The long and short of it was that I told him I expected to be provided for; that I always hated the stage, and had no desire to return to it. He couldn't take it in at all. "Provided for!" he cried. "Yes: a pretty provision for a woman with your tastes. Why, if you come back to us you would be making three times as much, not to speak of the opportunities you would have of getting rich in other little ways." I thanked him for the delicacy of the last allusion and turned him out. When he was gone I burnt

lavender in the shovel, and opened the window. Certainly my sensibilities have become more acute in these five years of leisure, and reading. The man used not to set me on edge in the same way in old days, with his filthy hints, and his scent and rings, and the aspirates he flings about when he gets excited. Well, good-bye for the present ; if you write that you would like to hear more of me and my prospects, I will inflict another letter on you, as long and as tedious as this one.

LETTER II

March 16th.

Before I say anything else, let me thank you from my heart, if I have one, for your letter. You *are* a true friend, and though I am not given to gush, I assure you it is a possession I appreciate. I have not

been spoilt by excess of that commodity in my life. But you say two things which I must answer. *D'abord*, you are unjust to George, who has not "behaved badly" at all. On the contrary, he has shown every consideration for me, and been extremely liberal in money matters, which we all know is the balm for wounded feelings. As to sentiment, the day for that has gone by. The difficulty has been to prevent his being too generous. He wanted me, among other things, to keep the carriage, which of course was out of the question. By-the-way, I have asked him to keep Ridgeway as his coachman: the man is a nice man and a first-rate driver, and, moreover, devoted to George, who is always kind to his servants.

But I am wandering from the point; the other thing in your letter at which I

take exception is your remark that I can never really have been in love with George, or I couldn't take the thing as I do, and write about it all so calmly. I certainly *was* in love with him : at least I think so : or, at the very least, I *did* think so ; that much I may say for certain. He was just twenty-one when I first saw him, and I wasn't more than a year older myself. How handsome I thought him, and how beautifully he was dressed ! Good Lord ! what fools we both were. I blush now when I think of the twaddle we talked and wrote to one another in those days, only five years ago. Yes, I think I loved him. Anyway I gave him what is always supposed to be the crowning proof of love, and quarrelled irremediably with my only surviving relative by doing so. Yes, it was genuine passion : I think I can say

quite truly I wasn't tempted by what he offered me. And I have been a good friend to him ; he says so himself. Lady Florence has me to thank that her future husband is in every way a pleasanter person to live with than he was before he knew me. I cured him of gambling : he only did it because he was bored ; and of drinking brandy and soda in the morning. I never could get him to read books, it is true. "Damn it all, Sibby," he used to say, "it is not in the bond ; I never engaged you as a governess." But I did succeed in giving him a taste for music, and taught him to sing quite passably ; he has a very pretty voice, and an ear that only wanted cultivation. Jack Hilyard told me once he overheard George's mother at a party telling some other Dowager of the iniquities of her second

son, who was living, I believe, at no end of a rate : " Now, dear Medmenham gives me no anxiety," the old woman whispered, confidentially : " of course I am not supposed to know, but a little bird tells me there is a *liaison* of some kind with quite a superior sort of girl ; and certainly he is not wild like poor Charlie : of course one ought to be shocked ; but it is everyway better that there should be something of the kind (and George is most discreet in keeping it in the background) than all this horrible scandal about married women, and divorce courts and all that."

I doubt if she would have been so entirely satisfied if she had known how anxious her " dear Medmenham " was to present me to her as a daughter-in-law about that time. But she was right in a way. I *had* a good influence over George.

Nothing is settled yet about the future. I have advertised the house to let, and will sell the furniture to the incoming tenant; I expect to move by the end of the month, and I shall go quite away, somewhere, for a time, but haven't made up my mind where. I will let you know as soon as I decide on anything.

LETTER III

March 28th.

You see I am still here; and I have all sorts of things to tell you that have happened since I wrote last. The fact is, I had a sudden inspiration as to where to go. In turning over some old papers one day I came on a little slip on which was written the name of a Welsh house-agent, and after cudgelling my poor brains for about ten minutes, I remembered how it

had come into my possession. In the early days, and indeed up to two years ago, George and I used sometimes, not very often, but whenever he could get away, to go off on wild little expeditions of ten days or a fortnight, and one year we stumbled on a lovely Welsh valley, where we spent nearly three weeks: it was our longest outing, and I think our last. How happy we were! Well, one day there, in one of our walks we trespassed, as we thought, through the tangled garden of the queerest little house in the world. Afterwards we heard it was empty, and we need not have been frightened, so we got an order from the local house-agent and went to look at it. I forget the history of the place, but I remember the look of the rooms, which were just as the last tenants had left them; I shall never forget the

chill of the cold daylight striking in on those deserted tokens of everyday life. The man thought we had an eye to taking the cottage, and offered it to us at an absurdly low rent. We took his address, and I never thought of it again from that day till three days ago, when the sight of the little slip of paper called up the whole place before me just as I saw it when I turned at the gate for a last look : the pink monthly roses round the porch, the one big stack of chimneys that seemed too heavy for the cottage to carry, the little wood, the grey rocks above with the sun lying warm on them, the tangle of garden shrubs and wild things growing almost up to the door : it all flashed upon me as clear and distinct as a picture, and I seemed to feel that it would be a pleasant place to be lost in, at least for the summer ; beyond

that I shall make no plans. I sat down then and there, and wrote to the agent to know if it was still vacant, and am eagerly awaiting his reply. I feel the need of getting away from all the people I have seen in the last five years: I would not have believed they would have been so vulgarly curious to know "how I take it" and "what I am going to do." I can't stay in London to be used as a peepshow. I am sick and tired of everything. My Aunt will not see me any more. I had a passing thought of her, but I know it would be no use. And as to your generous invitation, I love you too well to saddle you with a guest in such an anomalous position. The fact is, what is called my "position" is being brought home to me, and I am beginning to realise that it is not, and never can be, the same as

before this episode in my life. Who should come to see me the other day but the parson of a neighbouring church. It seems some garbled version of my story had got round to him, and he pictured the poor girl betrayed and forsaken by the heartless nobleman. I don't know whether to laugh or cry when I think of the poor good man. He came so kindly and meaning to be so tender with me, and rejoice over the brand it was perhaps not too late to snatch from the burning; and he was so embarrassed at finding me so unlike what he had evidently expected. He called me his erring sister, and talked about Mary Magdalen, and finally offered to get me into a "home." I really hated myself for being amused: he was doing his duty so nobly. I assured him I was not in want of money, and required no

assistance, and I could see that he felt himself that his little phrases *de circonstance* were not quite appropriate. Next day he came again, and said, if I liked, his wife would get me a place as governess with some friends of hers going abroad, "without mentioning my antecedents." But this too I was forced to decline; and, to say the truth, it struck me as a somewhat questionable direction for their philanthropy to take. Somehow when I have read in novels of the "erring sisters" as the clergyman called them, it has never occurred to me to think of myself in the same category. I can't tell why, but the description seemed as much outside of any experience of *mine* as though I were the clergyman's wife herself.

So I suppose these two interviews left an unpleasant taste behind them, and

perhaps had something to do with my desire to get away altogether for a little.

All this time I have almost forgotten to tell you that I have seen Lady Florence. She and her mamma came up to shop. They don't come to town till after Easter, so their carriages are in the country, and George lent them his brougham; I was in a hansom and met them at a corner where there was a block, and of course knew at once who it must be. I wish you could have seen the deprecating glance my poor Ridgeway directed at me over his high collars from the box: it *was* a trying situation for him, I felt. Lady Florence is very pretty, prettier than I was at my best, and very young—she can't be more than nineteen or twenty—but she doesn't look amusing, and she dresses horribly, in the smart English style; a little poultice

B

of a scarlet cloth cap on her head, a tight jacket, and a wretched little pinched in waist; that, thank Heaven, is a folly my father the doctor, and perhaps even more my French mother, early taught me to avoid. Forgive all this. I have nothing to do all day but write, till I get the house-agent's answer, and after that I shall be too busy to write a line.

Your affectionate

SIBYL.

P.S.—George is to be married at Easter down at the young lady's home in the country. I hear the mamma is very proud of having caught him, he being supposed to be impregnable.

LETTER IV

TANFRWS, CWM-Y-STRAETH, N. WALES,

April 10th.

DEAREST MILLY,

I feel utterly and entirely wretched, and as you have accepted the office of confessor, I mean to relieve my feelings by pouring out my ill-humour to you. I begin to think I was a fool to come here, where I expect I shall mope to death, and yet where better could I go, or what better could I do? I arrived at dusk yesterday evening, and was met at Abergaelau, the nearest station, by the old gardener, with a ramshackle waggonette from the one inn in the place. My poor old Virginie shed tears during the entire journey, which did not tend to raise my spirits: you know she was my poor mother's dresser in the

days when mamma was a star of the Parisian ballet, and she has stuck to me ever since, poor dear ! I sent away the other servants before I left London, but she, I am sure, will never leave me.

A drizzling rain, that seemed like steam, was falling when we emerged from the station ; it was stifling, and cold at the same time, and, as our conveyance was an open one, we got very wet during our five-mile drive. Also it soon got quite dark, and we jolted over the stones without an idea where we were going, in a silence which was broken only by Virginie's muffled murmurs of horror and alarm, and invocations to the Virgin, and all the Saints of Heaven.

When we came to the village here, we were stopped by a crowd of people ; the old gardener descended to inquire what

was the matter, and returned with the intelligence that it was a poor quarryman, who had fallen down dead in a fit : they were carrying him home. Somehow it seemed like a bad omen ; Virginie, of course, accepted it as such, and begged me to turn back and fly from this wilderness which the hand of Heaven warned me was uninhabitable in so clear a manner. But by this time the crowd had passed, and the vehicle proceeded on its way.

Never shall I forget the dreariness of my arrival at my new home : the house enveloped in this grey mist was very different from the picture I retained of it, under that warm August sunshine, as different, I thought a little bitterly, as my life now and then. After the comfort and neatness and warmth of the Ebury Street house, these empty forlorn rooms, with the

damp mouldy smell of all places long unlived in, seemed melancholy as the tomb. The woman who has been got in from the village to help Virginie (and who has been selected principally on account of being one of the few who can speak English), had lighted fires, but they sputtered damply, and the chimneys nearly all smoked, as though they resented being called on to do duty again after so long a holiday. I had sent down my piano and some books, and such prints and china, and so forth, as I was specially fond of. But nothing was unpacked, and the rows of packing cases looked in the dimly-lit hall like so many coffins for dead quarrymen. To-day it is raining as I never recollect to have seen it rain before, one continuous downpour of water in great sheets. The hills which I remember as

surrounding the place, are so completely blotted out that one might be in Cambridgeshire; there are patches of damp on the walls and ceilings, and from a large leak in the skylight on the stairs I can hear the continuous dripping of the water into the footbath that Virginie has placed below it. She, good soul, refreshed by a night's rest, has gone to work tooth-and-nail to clean up and get things in order. Tib, too, has accommodated himself to circumstances, and is snoring peacefully before the fire, which has at last consented to burn, in spite of the rain that drops with a hiss into it down the chimney. Virginie is making out a list of all sorts of things that she wants and for which I have promised to send to London, and this has consoled her. As for me I haven't even the energy to unpack. I

have been out, and looked sadly at the packing cases that contain my goods, and from which Mr. Mutter, the gardener, has removed the tops, but I feel incapable of doing anything but sit and grumble to you. Nothing seems worth while. What is the good, I ask myself, of bothering to make the place look nice when not a soul will see it but myself? The fact is a sense of the awful loneliness of my life is weighing on my soul. What have I to look forward to? I am still a young woman, and yet everything seems to be over for me, and looking back is not much more agreeable than looking forward. Good God! What a mess I've made of my life. I seem to have given everything and got nothing in return. I am bitter and black this morning, and life seems inexpressibly dreary. I almost think it would be

happier to go back to London and go to the dogs utterly. And yet I know I couldn't do it; if I did I should be wretched, wretcheder even than I am. Shall I never enjoy anything any more, I wonder? Look where I will I can see no road by which happiness can reach me. And yet I am only twenty-seven. And I do so want to be happy. That clergyman who came to see me, would say I was reaping the inevitable reward of sin. Sin? Was it sin? It never struck me in that light. My ideas of religion are of the vaguest. My dear father, who was the best of men, was a freethinker on all subjects, a great reader and quoter of the French eighteenth-century philosophers, a deist of the school of Voltaire; he used to talk about the "*choix librement consenti*" and all that kind of thing. My poor mother

was a devout Catholic, and very superstitious, but her ideas on certain subjects, though less the result of philosophic reasoning than of early habits of thought, were even easier than papa's. But all the same the thought is borne in upon me that there are grave disadvantages in my position in the world. The lawyer who was winding up my affairs and settling things in London, when he was going to write about this place for me, asked what he should say his client's name was. "Why, Crofts, of course," I said, sharply; "what else should it be?" "Oh, certainly," he answered, hastily; "certainly, of course;" and then added, with a horrid little downward drop of his eyelids, 'May I say *Mrs.* Crofts? You see it will save tiresome inquiries; you are rather young otherwise to live alone." I hate having to

do that kind of thing. Why should I call myself Mrs. ? Why must I lie, and tacitly own I'm ashamed of what I've done, when I'm not ? That's the kind of thing that galls my pride.

LETTER V

(Undated.)

* * * * *

How can you ask who "Tib" is ?

Don't you remember my pug ? He is the darling of my heart. I am not by way of caring much for dogs as a rule, and when George, who looked on the possession of a dog as about as necessary as a house, or food, or a name to be called by, insisted on presenting this one to me, I was secretly rather horrified ; but he has somehow contrived to wind himself into

the inmost recesses of my heart, so that I think I love him better than any one else in the world, which, after all, is not saying a great deal, for my powers of bestowing affection seem to have withered away for lack of exercise. Sometimes I think I have lost the power of feeling either pain or pleasure, anything but this intolerable sense of the flatness and dulness of life. I almost wish that the ending of my life in London had been more of a grief to me ; that I was suffering from a good old-fashioned broken heart : I should somehow be a more interesting object to myself. It irritates me to remember that I have not even the luxury of being an ill-used woman. My inability to feel shocks me : I see that I have deteriorated, and hardened : I used, I am sure of it, whatever my faults were, and they

were many, to have a warm heart. I loved my father with a love that was half worship, and my poor sweet pretty mother, with a love that was more than half protection: and I think I loved George — once. Yes, I'm sure I did. But I seem to have outlived all power of emotion. When I die my epitaph will be "bored to death." And it isn't as though it were only the life that I have chosen that is boring me. It must be something inherently wrong in me. Had George remained faithful to me, I should have been worse bored: had I taken old Prossett's offer and gone back to the stage, etc., I should have been worst bored of all. And something tells me, that were such a thing possible for me as to have been a wife and mother, and led the life that you, and such as you lead,

boredom would have been complicated with even worse things.

I don't ask if boredom is the inevitable lot of humanity, or even of all women, because I know women who are never bored, but it does seem as if this curse was on me, and how to fly from it I don't know.

However, I am getting used to it, as the eels to being skinned. I have unpacked my possessions, including all the latest French novels. I read and sew, and play the piano, and try to fancy that it amuses me. Mr. Mutter, who possesses every trade and all arts, is slowly, with the intermittent help of a desultory Welshman, making the house comparatively watertight.

I wonder if it ever stops raining in this country. Virginie thinks not.

LETTER VI

TANFRWS, April 18th.

Oh, my dear Milly, the beauty of this place! I know I could never describe it to you, but I'm going to try. After the week of almost continuous rain, the weather has changed, and with it the whole face of Nature.

Virginie burst into my room this morning, "Mamzelle Sibylle: enfin le soleil," and I leapt out of bed and ran to the window; it was as though a fairy had been at work in the night. The whole place was transfigured. As soon as I was dressed I rushed out into the garden, and stood there snuffing in the spring.

The cottage stands a little back from the high-road, and raised sufficiently above it to command a view of the open

country and the estuary of the river, and just a narrow streak of sea, backed by the glorious hills of the further coast. These hills to-day are of every shade of purple and blue, and green and yellow, as the great cloud shadows go rolling across them ; and the sea forms a streak of flashing silver between that enchanted region and the no less beautiful realities of the nearer landscape ; wide flat water-meadows full of cattle lie all round the river ; beyond, in the middle distance, is a little double rise (hardly a hill) of waste land, ablaze with gorse, between the two knolls of which the river runs out to join the sea ; they form, as it were, the gates of the valley, a melting away of the great hills on either side into the plain. And away on the right I can just catch a glimpse of the shipping in the harbour

at Abergaelau, and the smoke from its chimneys. On both sides of the cottage, and nestling close round the back of it, is a little wood, just touched with its first faint wash of green, in which the ground is carpeted so thick with primroses that you cannot walk there without treading on the plants. The whole of this small forest is alive with birds. I never heard so many anywhere before, and it seems as though they had all begun to sing together to-day with one consent, to celebrate the return of their god, the Sun. Above the wood, behind the house, the ground rises, almost precipitously, into a region of wild tumbled rocks, that to-day, with the sun on them, look perfectly sublime. Above them still, I am told, is a wide stretch of moorland, dotted with farms, which stretches back and up to

c

Moel-yr-Cwl, one of the highest hills in the country, but of these upper regions nothing of course is visible from below, and the rocks stand out against the blue sky as though some Michael Angelo among giants had hewn them and set them there for the special admiration and awe of the dwellers in the valley. The cottage is thus shut in from the north, east, and west, and faces almost due south; before it, sloping steeply to the road below, lies its garden, a wilderness of fruit-trees, vegetables, and flowers, not too well kept, but making a most picturesque foreground to the landscape. Through the wood, on either side, go two communications with the world — to the west, what may be called by courtesy a carriage drive leading directly into the village of Cwm-y-straeth (which lies close

beside me, but shut out by the wood, on the road to Abergaelau); to the east, a footpath that winds down till it joins the road higher up the valley.

Are you bored to death with all this description of my domain? I want you to know just what it is like, and to be able to see me in my new surroundings, and how else can I accomplish this? I don't suppose there is such a thing as a photographer within twenty miles, and, I am thankful to say, I have never been bitten with the notion that I could sketch; so that I can sit down before such scenery as this and fold my hands and really enjoy it without making myself unhappy by attempting a bad copy of it on a bit of paper.

I have been interviewing Mr. Mutter, who was busy digging in the garden, and

who promises to be a source of much amusement to me; he is a cynic philosopher, soured, I suspect, as I shall soon be, by living too much alone, and, like Dogberry, "one who has had losses." I did him the wrong of supposing him to be a Welshman, but luckily discovered that though in Wales he was certainly not of it, before I had let out to him the mistake I had made. His contempt for the country of his adoption is unbounded.

"What a lovely day, Mr. Mutter," I said. "I began to think it was never going to be fine any more."

"You might ha' thought so, if you'd seen it rain as I have here for six weeks without stopping, but most likely you will if you stays here long enough; call *that* rain: you don't know how it rains in

Wales. Wait a bit. July's our wet month."

"What are you doing?" I asked, thinking my choice of a subject had not been a happy one.

"Diggin'," was the laconic reply.

"So I see," I returned, determined not to be snubbed; "but what are you going to plant?"

"What am I going to plant?" replied Mr. Mutter, slowly. "I ain't a-goin' to plant nothing."

For some time I thought this was all the information I was likely to get. I had agreed with the old man, as my knowledge of gardening was of the most untrustworthy, and as he had apparently cultivated this piece of ground for some years for his own benefit and on his own account, and, moreover, did not

appear to contemplate any other arrangement as possible, that he should continue to do so, and sell me the produce : in addition to which I am to feed and lodge him, and he is occasionally to help in the house in such matters as the cleaning of the knives, and blacking of my boots. On the matter of wages he appears indifferent: I suppose what he makes by the garden is sufficient; his wardrobe, at least, does not seem either costly or extensive. So you see, as matters stand, I have no positive right to know what his operations are. However, he presently relented, and driving the spade savagely into a clod, he looked up and said :

“I’m a-goin’ to sow seed. Maybe pea-seed, maybe not ; if I don’t tell you, you won’t be disappointed when it don’t grow.”

"Why shouldn't it grow?" I asked.

"Because what don't get washed away by the rain, the birds 'll eat," he replied, and turning, he shook his fist at the little wood with an expression of concentrated malice. "That wood's choke-full o' birds, and them birds has more out of this garden by half than what I does. There's no beating these Welsh birds; I wish the people was half as clever."

"It looks like a very rich soil," I hazarded, looked at the shining, newly turned earth.

"It's a good soil for weeds," retorted Mr. Mutter. "They grow. Bless yer, the birds don't eat them. Welsh weeds is the one thing as can master Welsh birds."

And indeed the appearance of the bed by which we stood amply bore out his assertion.

My mind wandering from the state of the garden to that of the house, I asked how long it had been empty when I took it.

"Well, it might be two year: no; it's more than two year: it must be three year, or more'n that; but I can't tell you exactly! a man loses count of time living all day by himself in a place like this."

"How came it empty so long?" I asked, vaguely curious about the history of the place. "Why did Mrs. Denbigh leave it?"

"Why did she leave it? She couldn't well help it. You see, when Mr. Denbigh was ruined, he went out and blowed his brains out. After that his widdler shut up the house and went away."

I guessed that some tragedy must be connected with this so strangely deserted house; and it seems I was right.

"What ruined him?" I inquired.

"Slate quarries ruined him," replied Mr. Mutter. "Same as they have many more. You see, slate quarries, they succeeds, or they don't succeed. Mostly they don't succeed: I don't know why. I don't understand their workin's; but if you was to go up on the higher hills anywheres round here, you'd find the deserted quarries all about by dozens, and the machinery in rust, and the quarrymen's huts in ruins. Well, if they succeeds, they makes your fortune. That's the way with them Henshaws; if they don't succeed, they ruins you; that was the way with Mr. Denbigh, they ruined him, and then he killed himself."

"But they do succeed sometimes?" I said.

"Once in a way they does, but it takes

a man like Robert Henshaw to make 'em. Mr. Denbigh hadn't got the grit in him. I don't know of no others in these parts as succeeds except the Henshaws; theirs is all up at the further end of the valley. They own pretty nigh the whole o' this side of the valley. Mr. Denbigh, he used to own a deal of land behind the house here, three or four farms way back to where his quarries was, but he sold fust one farm and then another; it all went into the quarries, they swallowed it all. This house and groun's is about all as don't belong to the Henshaws now; I call it Naboth's vineyard, for they wants to buy it, I know. But Mrs. Denbigh has a feelin' about the place; she won't come nigh it, but she won't part with it, and so there it is. She's got a little money of

her own, just enough to live on somewhere, where she lived afore she was married."

"Wasn't this a very small place for a man as rich as Mr. Denbigh was at first, to live in?"

"Lor' bless yer, this wasn't his only place. When first this was left to him he had a fine house in London, as I've heard, and a place somewhere in England besides. But little by little it all went, till at last he lived here altogether, and then he killed hisself here, and went to a smaller house still," he concluded, with grim humour.

The tragedy of my poor predecessors has made an impression on me. I can't go into the pleasant little wood without thinking of the pistol shot that has startled its echoes, of the poor dis-

appointed life that came to its violent close there. I wonder if the place has a curse upon it, and if every one who comes here is bound to make shipwreck and come to grief. But these are not lively speculations, nor calculated to amuse you. So good-bye for the present.

LETTER VII

April 20th.

I have beheld a vision, and had what, in the extreme monotony of my new life, might almost pass for an adventure. This morning I was sitting out on the little platform that immediately surrounds the cottage, before the garden begins its abrupt descent to the road. A little stream comes tumbling down through the wood, from the rocks above, and straight through the garden till it disappears under the road

in a tunnel that has been dug for it. I had brought out a chair and my guitar to the edge of this brooklet, and was alternately watching its eddies, and looking up at the young shoots of a horse-chestnut over my head which I almost fancied I could see grow. The air was at once so fresh and so soft, that it was a pure pleasure to exist, such as I have not felt for a long time. I was humming Massenet's pretty setting of the song from "*Le Passant*"—

"Mignonne, voici l'avril,
Le soleil revient d'exil,
Tous les nids sont en querelle
L'air est pur, le vent léger"—

when it seemed as though the hero of the little play had come, in person, to visit me. Out of the wood there emerged with a jump, and within twenty feet of where I

was sitting, the most beautiful creature I think I ever saw, a lad of eighteen or nineteen, who stopped short on seeing me, and blushed furiously. If you can imagine a young Hermes from the British Museum, dressed in modern shooting clothes, coloured and animated, you will have some idea of his beauty. The shapely head with the tight small curls clustering round the broad brow, the short straight nose, the firm yet delicate curves of the mouth and chin, the strong full throat exposed by the open collar of his white flannel shirt, and the whole figure from the square shoulders to the delicate ankle and large foot ; every detail was accurately true to the type with which we are all familiar in the best Greek sculpture. The strength of manhood was combined in just the right proportion with the grace and

suppleness of boyhood in his carriage and pose. His hair was brown, touched with gold at the temples, his eyes the bluest I ever saw, and his whole face glowed with health, sunburn, and surprise. Can you wonder that with the sun shining full upon him, and backed by the dark undergrowth from which he had just emerged, such a figure should have seemed to me nothing short of a vision. I sat and stared at him in mute and undisguised admiration. He on his part seemed not less surprised than I was, and much more disconcerted ; and, pulling off his cap, he began hastily to stammer an apology for his intrusion. A white setter and a couple of fox-terriers followed him, at sight of whom Tib retired hastily under my chair and growled faintly.

“ Down, you brutes ; go back,” said the

boy, threatening them with his stick ; then turning to me, he went on : “ I’m sure I’m awfully sorry ; I beg your pardon. I didn’t know any one was living here ; at least, that is, I *had* heard something of some one’s coming, but I didn’t know you’d come, and I’ve been so in the habit of cutting about here just where I liked, you know, that—that——”

By this time I found my voice, and hastened to assure him that I hoped he would continue to “cut about,” undisturbed by me. The prospect of sometimes having this splendid specimen of health and beauty to look at and talk to, struck me as an exhilarating variation from the types of Virginie and Mr. Mutter.

“Won’t you sit down and rest ?” I asked ; “I can get you a chair in a minute.”

“Oh, never mind about a chair,” he answered, flinging himself on the bank at my feet, “and I don’t know that I want to rest, but I shall be very glad if you’ll let me stop and talk a little.”

“It will be very kind of you,” I replied, quite truly; “for you may fancy I don’t see a great many visitors.”

“There ain’t many neighbours, are there?” he said; “but I can’t think how my mother didn’t know you were here. I fancy she must have thought it was a different class of people who’d taken the cottage, though: very likely that’s it. Of course when she knows it’s a lady—— but are you——”

“Am I a lady, do you mean?” I interrupted, not without malice.

At this the poor boy blushed more than ever. “You know that wasn’t what I

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was going to say," he protested; "I meant, are you the mistress of the house, and all that; or have you a mother, or husband, or any one?" He stopped uneasily: "You will think me awfully impertinent asking so many questions," he said, with a pretty shy grace.

"I am the head of the family," I said, amused at his directness, "and its tail, too; you will find no one here but me."

He looked for a minute as though he should like to say something pretty, but hadn't the courage. "A widow?" he said, softly, and I did not contradict him.

"Do you play the guitar, Mrs. —?"

"Crofts," I put in. "Yes, a little; I've been learning for about a year. I began last summer when I was on the Thames; you can't take a piano out in a boat."

"Oh! do you know the dear old river?"

he said, eagerly ; "that *is* jolly. I was at Eton, and in the boats. Do you know Eton?"

"Yes; I have been down as low as Windsor once or twice, but it was a long row from where we were ; we didn't do it often. Are you still at Eton?"

"No, worse luck : I've just left : it was a beastly shame ; if I'd stayed till Election I should have been in the eight next half ; and I can't go to the University till October ; but my tutor went and let out to the Head that I was nineteen, and they wouldn't let me come back. Wasn't it horrid of him? I *am* savage about it."

"Well, I hope it will be all the better for me ; if you are staying here, perhaps you will come and see me sometimes."

"Of course I will, if I may ; but you

have told me your name, and I ought to tell you mine. I am Norris Henshaw."

So this was one of the favoured family that owned the one successful quarry. I looked at my visitor with quite a new interest in this light.

"Norris is a rum name," he continued ; "but I was called after old General Norris, my mother's uncle ; he was a grand old swell, and my godfather ; but his Christian name was Caleb, and mother said she couldn't stand that, so she called me Norris."

"I have heard your name, your surname, I mean," I said, "in connection with the quarries up the valley ; you are great people in this part of the world."

The boy laughed. "Oh !" he said, "I am half sick of the quarries. We breathe slate : there is no getting away from it."

"You would have to get away from a great many pleasant things with it," I suggested.

"Oh, I know what you mean," he said; "we shouldn't be so well off without it, and no more we should. And we owe it all to Robert."

"Robert?" I echoed, inquiringly.

"He's my cousin, Robert Henshaw. I forgot you don't know anything about us."

"Won't you tell me? It would interest me to hear." I didn't more than half believe it would, but I wanted to watch his frank young face, and hear his voice; he seemed in tune with the lovely spring day, and I felt I should enjoy them best together.

"If it won't bore you," he answered. "You must stop me if I do. I am never tired of talking about Robert."

I only nodded, and leaned back in my chair, so he went on.

“My father married when he was quite old: I hardly remember him; he was years older than my mother. Robert had been always supposed to be the heir; he was the son of my Uncle Charles, father’s younger brother, and was called after my father. Well, don’t you know, lots of fellows, when I was born, would have been furious and all that, but Robert has always been the best friend and kindest brother to me a fellow ever had. You will know him, and can judge him for yourself. But you won’t guess half that he is; half that *I* could tell you about him. He taught me to ride, and to fish, and to shoot, and indeed everything I know, or am, worth knowing or being.”

“I thought,” said I, “you spoke just

now of owing your wealth to him too."

"So we do," he answered, "and I like to think it; I love to be under obligations to him. When father and Uncle Charles died mother was a youngish woman, and of course knew nothing about business; the quarries, I believe, were in a wretched state for want of proper working: I don't know much about it: I was a kid at the time; but I know that Robert, who was hardly more than a lad, and had been knocking about the world enjoying himself, took the whole thing on his shoulders, and went to work at it like a horse in a mill; he straightened out the whole business, introduced the new machinery, sacked the overseer, who was feathering his own nest and cheating us, and somehow carried it all through. He has often told me

what a funk he was in at the responsibility he'd taken on himself; all the quarries round here were giving out, and the old wiseacres about the place thought he was mad to get down a lot of new machinery and all that, at such a time. Sure enough it did seem as though the quarry were worked out at one time. One night he paid all the men their wages, and then he sat up all night with his books and accounts and things, determined to shut up the whole concern next day, unless something turned up. He had fought it out to the last, but then he went to bed in the grey of the morning and cried himself to sleep. Three hours afterwards they came to tell him they had struck a new vein of the very best slate. It's fifteen years ago, but the quarry has behaved itself ever since,

and no one can compete with our slate at all."

"I don't think I have heard anything so interesting for a long time," I exclaimed with enthusiasm; "it really is most dramatic; and you tell it all so well."

"My heart is in it," he answered, with a pretty modest look; "isn't he a hero, and ain't I right to be proud of him, and grateful to him?"

He stayed talking some time longer, till Virginie came out to say breakfast was ready, and was amazed at sight of my guest.

"Won't you share my frugal meal?" I asked.

He hesitated a little, and then said, "Yes; it's a queer time to *breakfast*," he added with a smile, "a quarter to one;

you live French fashion, I suppose. *I* should call it *lunch*."

"Ah! but you wouldn't call its predecessor 'breakfast,'" I answered. We were quite good friends already. I have heaps more to tell you, but my hand aches with writing so much, and no envelope will contain my letter if I make it longer. *La suite au prochain numero*. Good-bye. "I kiss your hands," as mamma used to say.

LETTER VIII

April 21st.

You wouldn't think it ever could rain here; all Nature smiles. It was so warm this morning, that I had to hunt out something thin to wear, and unearthed the white flannel gown I had made, last year, for the river. Really when I put it on and looked in the glass, I was delighted. I

looked ten years younger than when I came here. Whether it is the damp climate, or the quiet, out-of-door life, or what, I don't know, but my complexion is quite revived. I used once to have a very pretty skin, but it is so long ago I had almost forgotten it. My eyes looked so large and clear, and my teeth so white, and even my hair seemed fairer and more inclined to curl than it has for a long time. Fancy if, at the touch of the blessed country, I am going to renew my youth! Who knows but my weary old heart may grow young again, like my face, in this earthly paradise.

I can *see* the trees coming out, I really can ; the boughs are a little greener, a little less pink each day. I haven't been in the country in spring for so long that I had quite forgotten what it was like.

Mr. Mutter wants me to buy him a gun to shoot the birds with, but I have sternly refused. The old wretch would take their nests, but he couldn't climb a tree to save his life, and it makes him so angry if any of the boys of the neighbourhood trespass on the domain, that I am sure he won't encourage *them*, even to take eggs. *À propos* of some trifling offence some of them had committed, and which had put the old man into a terrible passion, I made the trite remark that "boys will be boys." "That's just what I can't stand in 'em," he retorted with great readiness; "if they could manage to be something else, I shouldn't so much mind 'em." That's the sort of thing that if it had been said by Sydney Smith or some one who had "got his name up," as George used to say, would have been

handed down to posterity as wit. Now, wouldn't it ?

My dear, if my letters appal you by their length and the abundance of their detail, you must remember that you alone take the place of the ten or twelve correspondents of most women, and that of all women on the earth's face I have least to do, and most need of letter-writing to keep me from dying of boredom. With which apology I take up my narrative. After my young friend left me yesterday, I felt dull ; so, as the day was fine, I sent Mr. Mutter to secure me the springless waggonette ; and, taking Virginie for company, drove up the valley road, to see what I could of the neighbourhood. The road runs along the bottom of the valley by the side of the river, with meadows on one side and woody hillsides

on the other. It is a lovely drive, if one were only all eyes, like the beasts of the Apocalypse ; but the flints, which are many and large, appeal to quite other parts of one's person. I am sure I could hear Virginie's bones rattling audibly.

I didn't extract much information from the driver, whose English consisted principally of "Oh ! yiss," "Yiss, indeed," and "Suttingly," which he answered indifferently to all my questions or remarks. He did tell me, however, that the house we passed about two miles up the valley was the abode of the Henshaws, a large house built of grey stone, rather appropriately the colour of the slate on which its fortunes were founded, standing high on a terrace, and surrounded by a perfect blaze of early flowering rhododendrons. It is a handsome place and beautifully situated ;

yet somehow it did not look interesting. Tanfrws has twice the charm. I do *not* covet my neighbour's house, but I do their horses and carriages which I saw in the stableyard as we passed.

The Henshaws are the Marquis de Carabas of this part of the world ; it may only have been from his small command of English, and tendency to agree with all I said, but whatever I asked the driver about, seemed always to belong to them : streams, woods, houses, fields, horses and cattle, Henshaw, Henshaw, Henshaw. They pervade the whole place and oppress me. I seem to feel them enclosing my unfortunate predecessors in a constantly encroaching circle of possession, till I feel stifled by them in turn. I have made a fancy portrait in my mind's eye of the wonderful Robert who did such things

towards the saving and increasing of all this beastly prosperity. I am sure he is a grave man, looking older than his age and beginning to be a little stout, quite the *homme sérieux* of the French Comedy; I shouldn't even wonder if he wore a black broadcloth frock coat, and a little ribbon tie in a bow, and I am certain he has a horrid scrubby little beard. I don't know why, but I feel I know him as though I had seen him. He does not live with the others, it seems, but in a rather ugly house, right in the village street, on the other side of me. I am sick of writing, and I see down in the garden below me, unless my sight deceives me, some periwinkles which have come out in the night. I shan't be happy till I have been down and picked them.

P.S.—I went down the garden and

picked my pretty blue flowers, and was turning to come back, when I heard the sound of a horse's hoofs on the road; looking that way, I saw a man, apparently not more than thirty, of a tall and rather thin figure, mounted on a beautiful dark chestnut; as he passed he exchanged salutations with Mr. Mutter, who was at work not far from where I stood. As soon as he was out of hearing, I turned to the old man.

"And who in the name of goodness is that?" I asked.

"Don't you know?" he answered.
"There ain't many about but knows *him*.
That's Mr. Robert Henshaw!!!"

LETTER IX

Sunday.

The Henshaws have just passed in the family brake on their way to church at Abergaelau, all in their Sunday best. I was in the garden, and saw them go by. They will have to drive five miles, for at Cwm-y-Straeth there is only a "Bethesda," or "Ebenezer," or "Moriah," or whatever it is called. These Welsh chapels are all built on one pattern, and look like the barometers I remember in my childhood, as they have each two doors, side by side, in the front, and a window overhead. I am always expecting to see the little man come out of one door, while his wife swings back into the other. What can one expect of a people whose highest devotional aspirations express themselves in one unvarying

type, and such a type of ecclesiastical architecture?

I couldn't help laughing when the Henshaws drove by; they expressed so perfectly the quintessence of English-Sunday respectability.

Mrs. Henshaw is still a handsome woman, though stout, and very well dressed in a rather ponderous manner. She looked elaborately the other way as she passed, which was a difficult manœuvre to execute, as she was sitting on the side of the carriage opposite to me, and consequently had her face turned fully my way. The girls are large, fair, and fresh, and would be pretty if their brother wasn't so much prettier. Norris was driving; he is less like the Elgin Marbles in a high hat and the ordinary garb of the Philistine, but still very

handsome. He looked rather red and guilty, I thought, when he saw me, but made me a very elaborate and careful bow. They probably look on me as only one degree removed from a heathen ; but supposing me to be ever so desirous of attending service, I don't quite see how I should accomplish that object, unless I went to the Moriah. Mr. Mutter does, but with rage and scorn in his heart, apparently as a civility to his Welsh neighbours, a kind of *amende*, I suppose, for so heartily despising them for six days out of the seven.

LETTER X

April 26th.

Since I wrote last I have had another visit from my young friend, but I thought his manner was changed. He seemed

less easy and frank and natural, much shyer, and more elaborately polite, than on his former visit. I observed that he said no more about his Mamma's calling upon me, and indeed he avoided the topic of his family altogether.

"Since I saw you," I said, "I have been up the valley, and seen your beautiful house."

"Oh, ah! yes, have you?" he answered awkwardly. "It is a pretty place, isn't it? A nice situation, and all that."

"Your rhododendrons are lovely. I have never seen any out so early before. Surely they are not the common kind."

"No, they are foreign, I think; but I don't know much about it. My mother"—and here he stopped abruptly and cast piteous eyes about; whether he was going to say that his mother

would tell me about them, or give me some, I shall never know, for he added suddenly: "How awfully pretty you've made your room; did you bring all these things with you?"

"Did you think I had bought them in Cwm-y-straeth?" I asked.

"I suppose, now, there's a lot of art in arranging a room like this. It looks as if you'd always lived here."

"You see, I haven't much to do, so I have plenty of time to devote to making my surroundings pretty."

"By the way, what *do* you do all day, living by yourself?"

"Oh, I play, and do needlework, and write letters, and read, read insatiably, all the books that come in my way, and sit with my hands before me staring at Nature."

"And are you never bored?"

"Never bored? Heaven bless the boy, I am never anything else."

This answer seemed to puzzle him. "Then why do you live here?" he asked.

"I am sure I don't know," I answered. "There seems as much reason for it as for my living anywhere else; but why do you always talk about *me*?"

"I hope it is not rude, but you are so much the most interesting person I have ever met," he answered, with that simple directness that is so charming in him.

"But you see I am not interesting to myself; or, at least, living, as you say, always alone, I get a little tired of my own company, and when I do have a visitor am glad to turn to other subjects."

So we talked of books we had read, and plays that he had been to when in

London in the Christmas holidays, and of the river, and his old school, and his friends, and his tutor, and all manner of things. He really is a charming boy, and I was quite sorry when he left me.

LETTER XI

May 1st.

I have been raging and boiling for the last few days, and would not write till I was somewhat cooled down. I had just got into a happy, placid frame of mind, and shaken off the devil for a little, and begun to feel like a Christian and be soothed by Nature; and these infernal people must needs go and stir me all up, and rouse my worst passions; I really can't forgive them; I feel savage when I think of it. All of which sounds a trifle

incoherent, I own, but wait till you hear. I told you I had a second visit from young Henshaw, and that he seemed shyer than at his first. Next day, rather to my surprise at seeing him reappear so soon, he came again. He was evidently indignant about something, and very red in the face, and began a good many sentences which he did not finish.

"What is the matter with you?" I asked, "You seem quite unlike yourself; has something put you out?"

"Oh! if you only knew——" he answered, and then stopped abruptly.

"Knew what?" I inquired.

"I'm ashamed to tell you," he said, "ashamed for myself, for them, for you, for everybody."

"Who's them, and what *do* you mean?" I asked, getting more and more puzzled.

"I can't believe it, and I won't," said the poor boy, excitedly.

"Believe what? I wish you would either speak plainly and say what's wrong with you, or talk about something else."

He's got into some scrape, I thought, but even then the nature of the scrape did not occur to me.

"Yes, yes," he answered, "let's talk about something else"; but he continued very poor company, until at last he wrung my hand at parting, saying, "Count on me, Mrs. Crofts, I shall always be your friend if you will let me; and you will let me, won't you? I don't care what any one says."

He was gone, and I did not need to detain him to ask what was the matter. The conviction came to me with a sort of sick surprise, that made me feel quite

faint for a second or two. So soothing had been the spring and the country, so different my life, so completely had I cut myself off from all old associations, that I had almost succeeded in forgetting that I was a social pariah, a creature whom an innocent boy could not visit but for his soul's harm. How the Henshaws had discovered who and what I was, or whether they only suspected, I did not care to inquire. "Unjust, unjust," I kept saying to myself over and over again like a parrot. If I were a vulgar *aventurière* going to a strange place and trying to creep into society on false pretences, then it would be natural and inevitable that I should undergo these humiliations, but I had accepted my position so proudly, as I thought, I had determined not to lie, and had asked nothing but to be let alone and

ignored ; I had given these self-righteous people no right to attack me. It did seem hard that, as long as I behaved with strict propriety, and lived so secluded a life, I could not be left unmolested even in this out-of-the-way corner of the world. And then I began to wonder, when the first jar had passed over a little, what I was to do with regard to Norris. It was evident he took the line of treating all reports about me as calumnies. Of course I couldn't let him go on believing me a slandered innocent, and himself my knight : it was too absurd ; and yet the task of undeceiving him was not a pleasing one. I should be so sorry for him ; and sorry for myself too, to lose the lad's fresh, jolly friendship. God knows my feelings towards him had been nothing but motherly. He seemed such a baby com-

pared to me; and yet, the idea just crossed me with real disgust, that the revelation might have a different effect on him; he might think that he could make love to me. I began to see I was very ill-fitted for the life I had cut out for myself: I didn't know how strong the world is.

I had just arrived at the conclusion that I must stop his visits, perhaps even go away, though the idea was painful to me, when I was startled by a ring at the front door-bell. No one ever came to see me. People with provisions went to the kitchen, and Norris turned up casually through the garden, so that I had never heard that bell ring before. I was not left long in doubt. "*Ce Monsieur demande si Madame peut le recevoir,*" and Virginie presented me with a card on which was

printed "Mr. Robert Henshaw." As I knew he was just outside the door, and must have heard the question which was delivered, as usual, at the top of the old woman's voice, I could only say "Yes," though I longed to say "No."

I knew quite well what he had come about before he said a word. But I made a sign to him to sit down, and tried to look unconcerned and inquiring.

"Mrs. Crofts," he began (and even at that moment I noticed what a pleasant voice he had), "I am here to talk to you about my cousin."

"About Norris?" I asked. I had never called the boy so, but I said it because I thought it would annoy; and the moment I had done so, I wished I hadn't. He gave me just the fraction of a glance, as though, by this little spurt of

vulgarity, I had somehow made his task easier.

“About Norris.” He assented quietly.

I daresay I was going to say something sillier still, but I stopped myself in time, and after waiting a second for my answer, he went on.

“If what I say offends you, remember I came in the place of my aunt, and because I thought, if she saw you herself, as she proposed, she would probably offend you more than I should. Norris is her darling and the pride of her heart, and she is consequently always on the watch for danger to him of any sort.”

“And in the present case I suppose I am the danger.” I interposed.

“I am not so rude as to contradict you,” he answered icily; it seemed as though everything I said dropped his view

of me one peg lower. "At any rate Mrs. Henshaw thinks so," he added. "Apparently certain rumours, no doubt groundless, have reached her, and she fears that Norris's constant visits to you may not be the best thing for a warm-hearted, impressionable lad just at the most susceptible age."

"And what does she wish *me* to do under the circumstances."

"What only you can do, discourage his visits."

"And if I refuse?"

"I did not come here to threaten, but to ask a favour; if you refuse to grant it, I can only go back and say I have failed."

"You say you have heard rumours about me;" I said, prompted by an idle curiosity to know how much they knew of the truth. "May I ask what they are? I

have only come to live here ; it does not seem to me a crime ; I have never asked any one to take any notice of me. Your cousin made my acquaintance accidentally. I enjoyed his visits, I confess ; and now you—well, not you then, but Mrs. Henshaw, anyway among you, you come to me and forbid me to receive him. Are you not almost bound to tell me why.”

He seemed rather staggered by the line I had taken. “I would rather not,” he said. “Look at it how you will, my task is an ungracious and even brutal one ; by thus insisting on my particularising, you make it very painful for me.”

“Do you suppose it is quite pleasant for *me* ?” I retorted. Really, that he should complain that *I* made it painful for *him* seemed to me just a touch *too* strong.

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“Rumour is only rumour, and of its essence vague,” he answered, “but since you force me to speak plainly, I will say that for a lady as young and as handsome as you are, to live alone, with no other protector than an old maid, is of itself enough to give rise to talk. You are called ‘Mrs.’ and pass for a widow, yet—” he finished the sentence only by a significant glance at my left hand. As usual I was sitting with my two hands lightly grasping the arms of my chair, and consequently in full view; as you know, I never could bring myself to wear a ring, and there lay my uncovered fingers, bare as when they came into the world.

“It is true,” I said defiantly, “I never was married, and I have no right to be called ‘Mrs.’ Nor was it my wish; I hate false pretences, and I was right; it

seemed a very little fiction, but this is what it has brought upon me."

"Heaven knows," he answered in a rather softer tone, "I have no wish to wound you, or to pry into your past, which no doubt contains painful memories; only I ask you—what you have just allowed, being the case—cannot you imagine that a mother with an only son, and that son a lad not yet out of his teens, might look on you as—well, as I said before, a danger?"

"I see," I said. "You suppose (or your Aunt does, it's all the same; since you come as her messenger, you identify yourself with her) that I am a needy adventuress bent on the capture of a rich and guileless boy; it is quite a common plot in plays, and you are sent to outwit me, perhaps even buy me off."

He shrugged his shoulders. "You have quite a talent for forcing one to be brutal," he said; "I tell you frankly that Norris is very naturally attracted by you, he more than half believes himself in love with you already."

"Then some of you have gone and put it into his head by your stupid interferences," I interrupted hotly, but he continued as if I had not spoken.

"His mother and I, who love the lad and desire his welfare, can see no end to such an attachment that we should be glad to have come about, and we are therefore anxious to put a stop to it. Should you even find that the place was too impossibly dull, and that you couldn't stand it, that would perhaps be the simplest solution of all; of course in that case any expense you might be put to——" But

that was more than I could stand, and I jumped up and rang the bell.

"If I am not to be allowed to receive whom I please," said I, in my most tragedy-queen manner, "at least nothing obliges me to receive any one I *don't* wish to." "C'est pour reconduire Monsieur," I added to Virginie, who appeared at the door. I don't think I ever saw a man look more astonished; evidently this was not at all how he had expected our interview to end.

He looked for a moment as though he would like to make some excuse or apology, but Virginie was holding the door open for him, and there was nothing for it but to go. "Good-bye," he said, "I am——"

"Good-bye," I answered stonily, looking straight through his head, and the next moment I heard the house-door shut .

behind him. Then I sat down and cried for half an hour, after which I had some tea, and felt better. I have seen neither of the cousins since, and I am glad of it. I can't make up my mind what to do about Norris. Heaven knows that what his amiable family fear for him is the last thing I desire to happen, and yet I am half tempted to encourage the boy if only to spite them; if it were not for the bother of the thing, I would. Can you wonder that I feel savage and bitter, and include the whole Henshaw Clan in one vast Anathema Maranatha?

Perhaps it is silly of me to care so much, but I do. I was beginning to feel happy and contented, and *good*, and this hateful occurrence has spoilt it all. Good-bye, dearest Milly; write me some balm, I need it. And Heaven bless you for all

your goodness to me ; this is the kind of thing that makes me appreciate it.

LETTER XII

May 6th.

Your letter has been the greatest comfort to me. Indeed, dear, when you think of it, you are almost the only friend I have in the world, and I would not change you for all the friends and relations of who shall I say? I don't know ; you may put in the name of the woman of your acquaintance who is richest in those blessings. Your advice is excellent, and I mean to follow it, to put those Henshaws out of my head, and to return to my peaceful way of life as though they didn't exist. I am just as well off as I was before, if I can only

succeed in forgetting this disagreeable incident.

I wish you could see the gorse here ; I have never seen anything like it. The whole country is covered with great sheets of flaming gold ; with the sun on it I can hardly look at it, it dazzles so. And (was it very ignorant of me?) but I never knew it had any scent before ; when the wind comes blowing over a great bush of it, the smell of honey in it is almost too strong. The primroses are all over ; not one can I find ; but there are lots of scentless violets, and one dear little pale one, with quite a different kind of shiny leaf, that I find in damp places. The fields, too, are full of cowslips, and in my little wood, a wealth of bluebells (what *you* call wild hyacinths) have changed my yellow

carpet into a blue one. Surely this climate is one of the oddest in the world; all signs that one can go by in other places fail one utterly here. You may go to sleep after an evening that by all rules ought to promise a spell of fine weather, and be awakened in the dead of night by such a sound of waters as makes you feel that in the morning you will look out on a flood; or, again, you may rise on one of the most hopeless looking wet days with a grey canopy covering the whole sky (not separate clouds) and a steady, soft, fine rain that looks as if it was going on for a month, and by twelve it will be the loveliest day you can remember.

Mr. Mutter is a wicked old man. He has been frightening poor Virginie with all sorts of cock-and-bull stories, which

the silly old woman swallows whole, about the ferocity and narrow-mindedness of the Welsh.

"They are the most bigoted lot you ever hear of," he said to her the other day. "I believe if they knew you were a Papist they'd burn the house down."

The poor old woman takes it all for gospel, and comes and implores me to fly from this "*pays de barbares*" while there is yet time. I shall have to remonstrate with the old wretch, who, I am convinced, only does it for his own grim amusement.

LETTER XIII

May 8th.

You will be surprised to hear from me so soon again, but I have got something to tell you that will make you laugh.

It is in vain that I resolve to keep the Henshaw family out of my life and thoughts; but this time they have entered both in such a comic fashion that I can't help feeling quite kindly towards them for procuring me some real amusement.

I got a letter from my lawyer yesterday, enclosing one from the house-agent, who said that a client of his had taken a sudden desire to come and live in this house, and that he did not suppose I should be willing to give it up, but that if it so happened I was, his client would give me whatever rent I was paying, and a bonus of "£50, or more, if I thought that insufficient." Now, is not that delightfully transparent? Do they really think that I shall believe in the existence of this mysterious client who has fallen so in love with this out-of-the-way, damp

cottage that no other abode will content him? Do I not know that the house has stood empty for three or four years, without so much as a nibble at it, so that its owner jumped at my offer of the absurdly low rent I pay, and never even asked who I was. No, no, Mrs. Henshaw! I hope I am not quite a fool. But isn't it enchanting? Do you wonder I am amused? Norris has been to call again, but I saw him coming, and having not in the least made up my mind what I was going to do about him, fled to the woods, and abode there till he had departed.

Family relations must be a trifle strained in the Henshaw *ménage* just now, I fancy.

It will probably end in my doing just what his mother wishes, for it really

seems the only way out of the difficulty, and yet it goes to my heart to do it: however, they don't *know* they are going to get their own way, and that's something.

I went and had my interview with Mr. Mutter yesterday. He was, as usual, occupied about some recondite gardening operations; but since the first snub I got, I knew better than to ask what he was doing.

"Mr. Mutter," I said severely, "it is very bad of you to frighten my poor old maid for your own amusement."

"Who's been frightenin' of her?" he retorted.

"Why, you have," I answered, "and you know it."

"What about?" he next demanded.

"You are equivocating to gain time,"

I replied. "You know quite well you have been telling her absurd stories about the bigotry of the people round here, and that it makes it unsafe for her to live here being a Catholic, or some such rubbish."

"Rubbish! it ain't rubbish. "It's those who talk much who talk rubbish. I talk little and sense."

"Do you mean to tell me, you tiresome old man," said I, for I was getting annoyed, "that you had any reason for what you said, except to tease Virginie."

"No, I don't mean to tell you nothing." And with that he turned again to his work as though to intimate that the interview was over. "I will not detain you," was written in every line of his back.

"I don't think you are very civil." I said majestically.

"May be not. I wasn't brought up to be; but I'm mostly polite to them as is so to me. "You came a-calling me names . . . but I will tell you this: there's more truth in what I told her than you'd think for, who haven't lived ten years in these parts as I have."

"Good Heavens," I said, "you don't mean that you really think there is any danger for her."

"These Welsh people," he answered, "are too great cowards to do anything spicity; they haven't got it in 'em, but they're awful narrow-minded, and they think a Catholic neither more nor less than a servant of the devil. They notice as you don't go either to church or chapel, either of you; and Mrs. Jones that works here, has, no doubt, been gossipin' in the village, about Mrs.

Verginney's images and pictures and popish doings."

"But what do you think they would do?" I asked, beginning in my turn to feel a little alarmed.

"They might very likely preach agin you in their chapels," he retorted, with a facial contortion that was very like a grin. "I shouldn't know if they did, for they preach in Welsh, and, long as I've lived here, I never could pick up more than a word or two of their gibberish; it breaks my jaw."

And more than that I could by no means get out of him. I can't in the least decide if he is making fun of me as well as of Virginie, but I am rather inclined to think so. Any way, I shan't disturb myself unnecessarily. I don't say Good-bye, for as soon as you have

done reading one of my letters you hear from me again. I think it is Thackeray who says of Swift's habit of always beginning a letter to Stella, as soon as its predecessor was sent off, that he "thus always kept hold of her kind hand, as it were;" and this is what I like to feel that I am doing with you.

LETTER XIV

TANFRWS, May 13th.

The Henshaws are in retreat; yes, the whole clan are actually put to flight; and it is I, insignificant as you know me, *moi qui vous parle*, who have effected this amazing rout. David, when he killed Goliath with a pebble stone, can't have felt more surprised. I was reading yesterday, with my back to a most

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convenient little side window that just lights my pet arm-chair, and my toes on the fender, for I still have fires on damp days, when Tib, who was asleep on my knees, began to growl, and at the same instant a shadow fell across my book. With Mr. Mutter's hinted warnings fresh in my mind, I looked over my shoulder with some apprehension, wondering if I should find a gigantic quarryman come to murder me for my supposed adhesion to the Romish Communion, when my eyes encountered those of Norris Henshaw, standing sadly outside in the rain, with a most woe-begone expression on his handsome face.

"Come in this minute," I cried to him, all my perplexity of what to do about him merged for the moment in concern purely maternal at the drenched con-

dition of his clothes, and I ran and unfastened the other window, which is a French one opening to the ground.

"I am hardly fit to come in," he said, but he came in, all the same. "I was afraid I was never to be let in any more," he added, as he shook himself like a big dog on the mat.

"I am like the person, whoever it was, in 'King Lear,'" I answered, "who wouldn't turn out his enemy's dog on such a day," or words to that effect. "Come, take off your coat, which is soaking, and put it on one chair and yourself on another before the fire; you steam like the happy autumn fields."

"Ah, Mrs. Crofts," he said ruefully, "you wouldn't care if you never saw me again."

"My dear boy," I said gravely, "I

should be very sorry; but you know your family don't like you to come and see me, and I know it, and you know that I know it; and such being the case, do you think that our interviews are likely to be quite *sans gêne* with this sad knowledge sitting always between us?"

"It's a shame," he burst out.

"So it is," I assented, "but it can't be helped; the world is so full of shames, that I for my part have ceased to call them so."

"That's the way you always talk, half joking and half sneering, yet I don't suppose you mean to be unkind, though you are always laughing at me; but then, as I said, you don't care—why should you?—if you see me or not."

"Norris Henshaw," said I, "if the truth were known, I suspect that I should

miss you out of my life a deal more than you would miss me out of yours. Your interests and possibilities, and, above all, your power of making friends, are just about in the proportion of a hundred to one as compared with mine. But though your visits have been the pleasantest things that have happened to me for a long time, I would much rather give them up than have you come here on the sly, or quarrel with your relations for doing so."

"You may be sure I shall not come 'on the sly,' as you call it," says my prince, very grandly. "I have simply said I did not choose to be dictated to; I consider myself free to visit whom I please."

"Well, and what do the family say to that?" I asked.

"Oh! the Mater's furious, of course; things are not pleasant up at the Plâs just now, I can tell you. She wanted to send me away abroad with a tutor, or some such rot, but I said I wouldn't go."

"That was perhaps more spirited than filial; has she anything else to propose?"

"Yes; now she suggests that we should all go up to London, and take a house for a couple of months. Of course the girls are wild to go, and have been pestering my life out to say "Yes." It seems hard to do them out of a season, if they want it, and have the chance, and yet I hate to be beaten. So I came to ask your advice. What do you say? If you tell me to stay and stick it out, I will."

"By no means," I answered, hastily; "it is the best possible solution of the difficulty; when your mother gives you

such a chance of retreating from an untenable position with colours flying, and all the honours of war, you will never be such a fool as to refuse. You will please her, please your sisters, please yourself; and though I confess I shall miss you, you will really please me. So go home and accept the offer graciously."

I could see that he was immensely relieved.

"Of course in some ways I don't deny I should like it," he admitted. "I think it would be rather a lark, and I should be able to go down to Eton half the time."

"Of course, of course," I assented; "and just before you go, you may come and say good-bye."

I am glad they have had the sense to go *with* the boy and look after him, and not been such fools as I expected and sent

him, off on his own hook. It is all very well for us to sneer at commonplace morality in the abstract, but the moment it is a question of any young people who are dear to us, we can't help desiring it for them, though we may laugh at it for ourselves ; and Norris is dear to me. I can't help being fond of the boy, and the thought of him knocking about London, and leading the life that the young men led whom I used to know there, the lot who came to the theatre, is anything but pleasant to me. I daresay "the wickedness of the world" may be "print to him" as to Bayley, Junior. I have known lads no older, and quite as infantile in appearance, who were most accomplished little *roués*, but somehow I can't help hoping this boy is different, with his beautiful innocent face and ready blushes, though I

daresay he would be much offended at my thinking so ; and, anyway, there is something ludicrous in *my* posing as the guardian of his virtue, when you come to think of it ; isn't there ?

LETTER XV

May 20th.

I have been reading George Sand's "Elle et lui." There is too much of the muse about George Sand to please me altogether ; she is never quite natural. I used to love "La petite Fadette," and some of the other country stories, but "Consuelo" was too impossibly good for this world. Still I admire her enough to wish she had never written this book. It seems unworthy of her. I can't help reflecting on the fact that she and George Eliot did just what I did, and nobody

seemed to think it odd. I suppose if I called myself John Snooks, and wrote novels, that it might be forgiven me too. Sometimes I think I could write a novel ; I don't fancy it's very hard. It has often struck me that the story of my parents and their queer marriage, and my own youth and bringing up, would make a sufficiently picturesque beginning to a novel ; but, good Heavens ! what a flat, stale, and unprofitable continuation when once the prologue was over and the play had got to begin ! After all, I suppose it is mainly out of their own lives that people evolve their plots. Certainly papa and mamma would have made a nice romance, and some day I think I will write it, only I should feel rather as if I were selling my parents for dissection.

The young medical student going to

study in the Paris hospitals, and falling desperately in love with the *première* of all *première danseuses* in the day when people cared more for dancing than they do now ; never hoping to even get speech of her, yet remarked and smiled on, and finally finding his love reciprocated, so that she was willing to give up everything—diamonds, and furs, and horses, and little apartment, all blue satin and gilding, and plant her Russian millionaire, and run away with him to England. It certainly was romantic, and mamma used to tell me all about it with most innocent absence of any suspicion that there was anything unsuitable to a child's ears in the recital. The contrast of her shabby little life in the small town, where my father set up in practice, with all she had left, must have been sharp enough, and the gradual

dawning on her poor mind that here it was *he* who was supposed to have lowered himself by his union with *her*, that instead of its being an immense feather in his cap to have taken her from her more wealthy and splendid adorers, she was looked on as a scandal and disgrace to him by those who had never even heard of her fame. It would all work up into a very clever story if it were nicely told.

They were married for my sake, but no one ever visited us, though my father came to have a large practice in the town. They were very happy together in a quiet way; I think they both appreciated the fact that each had made a large sacrifice to love, and they were grateful to one another in a silent lifelong manner. I was a tall girl of fourteen when mamma died. After that two or three people did try to

be friendly to us, but we had got so used to living alone, that neither of us wanted outsiders, and father was very proud, and loyal to mamma's memory. He was fond of reading of all kinds, and I used to read aloud to him when he came in from his rounds; that is what gave me my love of books, and early familiarity with so many authors girls don't generally read.

You once asked me to tell you about my youth, and how I came to go on the stage; I didn't in the least set out to do so when I began this letter; it has all grown out of George Sand, I don't quite know how. It was very simple; when the blow came that I can't yet bear to think of, and I lost my dear father, it turned out he had left hardly anything; I don't think he made a great deal; he doctored so many people for nothing; and

we lived well and paid ready-money with the fees he brought home. Neither of us kept any accounts. Anyway I was told by my aunt (my father's only sister, who never would see him while mamma lived, but made it up with him afterwards) that I had got to do something for my living. I never cared for young children, and would sooner sweep a crossing than be a governess. I hated the stage from the first, but it was so much the simplest thing to do. I had a fair voice, and had been taught singing. Mamma had taught me to dance; I was good-looking, or could make up good-looking, and I could mimic any one I had ever heard speak. So there it was. On to the stage I went by a sort of necessity, and off it as soon as might be, in the way you know.

LETTER XVI

May 23rd.

Ah, Milly, dear, how well I remember the day I first saw you, and how I bless it! I can see the whole scene—the big hall all full of soft diffused light, and the glorious marble people standing calm and solemn all round it. The scattered easels, with the curious heads that peeped round them at the entrance of a stranger. And you so fresh and sweet, with your great apron and neat hair, among all those untidy women and dingy boys. I went a great deal to galleries and museums in those long empty days, when Lord Medmenham had so many things to occupy him, and I found time a little heavy on my hands. I remember the sudden impulse to speak to you (what an inspiration it was!) to ask

some question as to whether visitors were or were not excluded from that room on students' days. Do you recollect how we drifted into talk about your drawing and about the statues, and you took me to see a favourite one that I did not know? I can hear you now, eager and enthusiastic, urging me, if I had so much time to spare, to come and draw: "Some people there couldn't draw a bit; and you would teach me, and it was so interesting, and so good for one, and one had only got to get something signed by a householder to say one was respectable." Respectable! I can still feel the cold water that ran down my back at the word. But though I left you somewhat hastily, I was moved to go another day, just to see if you were still in your place, and you welcomed me so prettily as though we were old friends. I

recall the day when you asked me to come and have tea with you in the lodgings where you were "living with another girl who was working at the Slade School." How I wavered and trembled and longed to accept! And when at last I plucked up courage to tell you who and what I was, and to say good-bye, as I thought, I can feel now the light touch of your hand on my arm, and hear you say, "May I come and see you?" Oh, my dear, dear friend, so true and loyal from then to now, though we have met so seldom, and though your life has changed so much since then, and become so full of new ties and duties, how can I ever thank you? If you had preached to me, tried to say "a word in season" as even the best and largest-minded of good women might have done, who would have taken great credit to her-

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self for not cutting me, I couldn't have stood it. I like to think of the good things that have fallen to you in life, to know that one person is good and happy, and has a husband, not *worthy* of you,—no man could be—but capable of understanding and appreciating you.

You are almost the only so-called virtuous woman I have ever known, and quite the only one I have ever liked. What a queer letter, all *à propos de bottes*!

I suppose the Henshaw element being eliminated, there is nothing in this poor, empty, beautiful valley left to write about but myself and my souvenirs.

For ever and ever your loving

SIBYL.

LETTER XVII

June 4th.

DEAREST MILLY,

It seems quite a long time since I wrote to you, yet it wouldn't be much of a gap in any ordinary correspondence. In the first place, I have had nothing to tell. You observed that I fell back on reminiscences in my last letter, and then my domestic arrangements have not been going smoothly, which always bores me. The woman I had got to help Virginie declines to come any more; she won't give any reason, but I incline to think that the crucifix and little plaster Virgin and saints in V.'s bedroom are a stumbling-block to her. It's a nuisance, because it entails getting a regular servant to live here, which I wished to avoid. There is

hardly another woman in the village who speaks English, and not one who will come in on any consideration to help with the work. Do you know of no poor drudge whose husband gets drunk and beats her, who would like to elope to this shelter? I don't want a girl; I should have to look after her morals, and who can tell what the eloquent eyes of some inarticulate Welshman might effect. Besides, Virginie would be sure to convert her, and I have no wish to embroil you with your parson.

That is grievance No. 1. The second you'll hardly believe, but it's a positive fact that it's extremely difficult to get anything to eat here. There is only one butcher in Cwm-y-straeth, and he is a farmer, who lives six miles off on the hill; he is only occasionally at his shop in the

village, and one never knows beforehand when these times are to be; at other times the place is locked up and left. This has been the case whenever I've sent lately; it is a week since I have looked on mutton; beef is a luxury one can hardly ever aspire to. The valley is thick with fat cattle, and the hillside dotted with sheep, but I seem in a fair way to starve in the midst of plenty. That one shouldn't be able to get fish at a mile and a half from the sea (with the exception of salt herring in deal boxes which come from Birmingham) is only to be expected, but the difficulty in obtaining even the amount *I* want of milk, cream and butter, with half-a-dozen farms within a walk, is really incredible. What they do with their dairy produce I can't think; they won't sell it unless they choose, and half the time, if

you try and argue with them, take refuge in their horrible language and reply "dim Sassenach" (at least that's what it sounds like) to all expostulations, which I am told means "I don't speak English." Luckily I've plenty of chickens, and ducks, and eggs, and the garden is full of vegetables and on these I mainly subsist. But all this can't interest you much. To make up for the dulness of *my* letter I enclose you one I have received from Norris; I think the style will amuse you; you may tear it up when read. Poor Sally Batten! That's the way these boys talk of us; she came to the theatre after I did, and can't be much older than I am, if at all.

Enclosed in the above.

“DEAR MRS. CROFTS,

“I hope you won't think it calm of me writing to you, but I thought you'd like to know how I was getting on. You must forgive a dull letter, as the girls are bothering round, and want me to take them to the Park. It isn't half bad being in London. My Aunt, Lady Hookham (she was a Norris), knows a lot of people, and has got us asked to a heap of dances. I've been to some, and rather like it now I'm getting over being shy. The girls are very kind about dancing with one. I thought they'd all have their own mashers and wouldn't dance with a boy like me, though for that matter most of the men I see at balls don't look much older than

me, and I remember lots of them at Eton. I've been down there several times; it's ripping going back there, and my tutor's awfully kind and puts me up as often as I like to go. The fellows ain't a bit impressed with my dignity, but they're very jolly. I don't go much to the play, it's too hot; but I dined with a fellow the other night, and went to see the 'Enchanted Horse.' Of course it's awful rot, but Shoresby's grand sport; he and Sally Batten keep the whole thing going. She's wonderful. My friend says she's over forty, and has lot's of grown-up children. The others will be going back to Wales the end of next month, but I shall be staying about, all August, with different fellows. I shall come home for some shooting in September though, and then I shall come and see you. What a

rotten letter! I hope you won't mind my writing to you.

"I am,

"Sincerely yours,

"NORRIS HENSHAW."

LETTER XVIII

June 7th.

Only think, my dear: I have discovered that I am actually being boycotted. Yes; it is not for nothing the butcher's shop is always closed when I send, and the cows of all five farms dry, if I want a pint of milk. Whether it is Mrs. Jones's reports of Virginie's idolatry, or my absence of any olatry, or what, I don't know, but it seems it is an organised conspiracy to starve me out and make me go away.

But the difference is so slight between

the goodwill and illwill of these singular people, that it has taken me a whole fortnight to find it out. Virginie came to me exclaiming :

“ Eh bien ! voilà maintenant où nous en sommes ; il paraît qu'on le fait exprès ; et c'est à cause de mes images, de mon pauvre beau Christ en plâtre. C'est Muttairé qui vient de le dire ; Madame peut l'interroger. Fuyons, fuyons ! Ah ! Canaille ! peuple impie ! Tas de barbares ! ” And the poor old woman burst into tears.

If this speech did not convey to me a very clear idea of the catastrophe, at least it gave me a clue by the mention of Mutter, and I begged that he might be called. He came in, in his hat, in which, I think, he sleeps, for I have never yet seen him without it (I don't know how he

manages in chapel), and eyeing the weeping Virginie sardonically, "I've been telling madam there," he said, "that I hear as there's been a deal of gossip and talk about this house, since you come 'ere, and the reason we can't never get what we wants, when we wants it, is that the people about have taken it into their wise heads they don't want you for a neighbour."

"Ils nous couperont la gorge ; ils mettront le feu a la maison," shrieked Virginie.

"Not understanding the language, ma'am, I can't take it on me to contradict you," replied Mr. Mutter.

"Virginie thinks there may be danger of their taking more active steps against us," I translated freely.

"Not they," Mr. Mutter answered with

conviction. "Bless you, they won't do nothing, these Welsh people; they'll pester in a hole-and-corner way like this, and you can't get the law on 'em, but when it comes to doing anything active or big they daren't do it. If you was to put your gold watch on the wall out there, and I was to put an old odd shoe, they'd take the shoe, and leave the watch; they'd get the pleasure of a bad action with no profit, and no danger; that's them."

"But how do you know that they really mean to do this maliciously? I don't see much more difficulty after all in getting provisions than there always has been."

"I'm told by them as knows," said Mr. Mutter mysteriously. "Suffice it, that if I didn't know it, I wouldn't have told it to you for true."

"How in the world can I have offended

any one? What harm have I done? What *can* they have against me?"

"There's no doubt Madam's idols and Papistical ways (here Virginie rapidly signed herself, murmuring 'Sacré cochon d'hèrétique') have had something to do with it; Mrs. Jones has been gabbling all over the village; then neither of you ever goes to church or chapel, and they don't know anything about you; and I hear, moreover that there's some talk of your having offended the Henshaws, and their being obliged to go away because you are here."

A new light broke in upon me at these words.

"Well!" I said, "of all the mean shabby tricks! *Now* no power on earth will make me go; I'll stay, if I stay alone, and if I starve."

To my great surprise Mr. Mutter, who was not at all in my thoughts as I said this, came up to me with something quite like warmth, and grasped my hand.

"Bravo," he cried, "I like you for it; I thought you'd cry like madam; we won't be beat by a parcel of Welsh people, will we?"

"No," I said, with more force than elegance. "I'll be damned if we will."

"There's one thing we could do," Mr. Mutter hazarded doubtfully, "if you didn't mind just writing a line to Robert Henshaw, and getting him to speak to 'em; they'd all do anything *he* told 'em."

"Listen to me, Mr. Mutter," said I impressively, "no power on earth will make me apply to Mr. Henshaw; there are reasons why I *can't* ask a favour of

him; and how do I know he's not at the bottom of the whole thing?"

"No," said Mr. Mutter thoughtfully; "I don't think it of him; but I wouldn't bet anything like the same sum that *Mrs.* Henshaw mayn't have a finger in the pie; *she'd* do anything."

"Well, anyway that's out of the question," I said. "But I think we can manage; we've plenty of ducks and chickens, and we can get more sent by rail; we must do our own baking, and I'll write for butter and condensed milk from London; you'll have to go into Abergaelau twice a week and get it; and there you can buy whatever else we want; there are regular shops there, and civilised people."

"Yes, that'll do, and I don't mind going for it; but all the same," he muttered as

he left the room, "it 'ud be a deal simpler to apply to Mr. Robert."

Virginie flung herself at my feet. "Et Madame s'obstine a y rester?" she cried. "Eh, bien, du moins, je te consacre ma vie; c'est pour toi, chere ange aux cieux; je ne quitte pas ta fille; nous mourirons ensemble."

I'm afraid I said, "Don't be a fool, Virginie," to this touching speech; the whole annoying ridiculous incident had chafed my nerves and temper; but I have subsequently kissed her and begged her pardon, and she goes about her work resigned and even cheerful, in the spirit of the early Christians, prepared to suffer everything for me and her faith.

LETTER XIX

June 10th, 188-.

MY DEAREST FRIEND,

I am so sorry my last letter has made you uneasy about me ; it was meant to amuse you, not in the least to frighten you. *Now* I am sorry I wrote it, especially as the complication is already at an end. Neither my heroism nor Virginie's has been put to a severe test ; and the end of the conspiracy is as surprising and original as the conspiracy itself. Who do you think is the enchanter, at the touch of whose wand, the land is once more flowing with milk and honey ? The remarkable Robert Henshaw himself.

I strongly suspect Mr. Mutter of being false to our agreement and invoking his assistance without my authority, which he

knew he would never obtain, but I am mean enough silently to enjoy the results of his treachery (if he is guilty) without taxing him with it.

This was how it came about: I met Mr. Henshaw suddenly at a turn of the road, yesterday, when I was taking Tib for a walk, and was surprised, considering the nature of our one encounter, that he not only bowed, but hesitated, as though about to speak. Nevertheless, I barely returned his salutation, and was passing on, when he called to me by name.

"Mrs. Crofts," he said, coming up to me, "please forgive my speaking to you, but I have something special to say."

"Pray say what you like," said I, nodding.

"I have heard with concern," he answered, "of the ridiculous and annoying

little plot that has been got up against your comfort. I trust, at least, you believe that none of my family are capable of being mixed up in such a low business."

I paused before replying; I wasn't sure I *had* quite believed what he wished.

"Mutter said you would have nothing to do with it," I answered evasively.

"Mutter did me nothing but justice, and I am grateful to him for his good opinion," he answered gravely, but with the faintest possible expression of amusement, "though he doesn't seem to have succeeded in convincing you, but I hope to do so, when I tell you that I have taken the liberty of stopping you, in order to concert measures for putting an end to the whole ridiculous state of things."

"You are very good," I returned loftily, "but I really don't see——"

“That it's any affair of mine,” he interrupted, “but it is, and I will tell you how. You see, though no doubt their religious views have something to say to it, I suspect the principal motive of these people has been to be pleasing to me, for you must know they have an immense opinion of me about here, partly because I am the working representative of the one successful quarry in these parts, but more, I really think, because I have been able to be of use to them.” He said it quite simply and naturally, without either false modesty or boasting, and I liked him for it. Mutter had told me that he was idolised by all the people about for his unwearying kindness, and for certain acts of heroism he had performed, a year or two ago, in a quarry accident. “The quarrymen,” he went on, “are better educated, as a rule,

and more intelligent, but the stupid folk who are annoying you are the farmers on the hills. Now the whole thing will stop of itself the moment they can be made to believe you are a friend of mine."

"You are very good," I said, as soon as he would let me, "but I really can manage all right, and I don't see why I should trouble you."

"Nonsense," he answered, "it's my bare duty; I am the cause, though most innocently, of this bother to you; and I am bound, in common justice, to remove it, and of course I will. Only——" he hesitated.

"Only what?" I asked.

"Well," he said, a little confused, "you see when these Welsh people get an idea into their heads, it isn't easy to get it out; at present their notion is that you are an

enemy to me and my race ; certain hasty expressions my aunt may have let drop before servants have no doubt got repeated from mouth to mouth, and much twisted in the process. Now, as I said before, what I've got to do is to convince them that this is all a mistake. You may think that an easy matter, but it's not ; in order to make them believe we are really friends, I'm afraid you must let me, merely as a matter of form you know, be seen coming to and from your house ; will you give me leave to call on you ? I needn't stay more than a few minutes—indeed, you needn't ever see me, if you don't like."

What could I do, except say that I should be very glad to see him, and that he was very kind ? I daresay it is a want of all proper pride in me ; and if I were like the rest of my sex, I suppose my

obligation to him would make me hate him. Instead of which I feel rather grateful, for I think he has acted from a sense of justice towards me, whom he certainly has no cause to love. So here I am, on visiting terms with the man I ordered out of my house, and beholden to him for the necessaries of life. It's a queer world!

LETTER XX

Mr. Henshaw has been to see me. I may say we were three at the interview, he, I, and the recollection, present to us both, of his one former visit. I never went through anything so shy, or felt such a fool, and I should be furious with him, if he hadn't evidently felt much the same. If I am to undergo many of these calls, I

feel that starvation, and the enmity of the entire Principality would be light in the balance. I couldn't give you the faintest notion of what we talked about, for I really don't know. What I longed to ask, but couldn't very well, was about how often this dreary ceremony had got to be gone through.

Will it have to be weekly, or monthly, do you suppose, in order to carry conviction to the mind of the Cambrian farmer?

LETTER XXI

July 4th.

You complain of my silence; and I thought I had been exercising the most commendable self-control in refraining from writing. "Why," I thought, "should I bore her with constant letters? Nothing happens to me; I have nothing fresh to

tell; I have seen no one new; I have described the place and its neighbourhood. She can't be anxious about me; she knows I am never ill, and the amiable design to starve me out came to an end almost before I had realised its existence. If I write, I shall only write about myself and my own feelings, which is bad for me, and self-indulgent, and morbid, and I shall probably grumble, and very likely make her unhappy." So I refrained even from bad words, but I beg you to believe that it was pain and grief to me. Oh, Milly dear, I wish I hadn't written those last words, they'll shock you. I knew I should do something in bad taste like that, if I wrote in my present mood. But if I tear this up and begin again, I may say something worse, so let us compound for that, and proceed.

It is a pity your demand for a letter has come just when my mood is dark, for I have been very tolerably calm and happy, for the' most part, during the last few weeks. It is quite surprising to me, in looking back, to find how few fits of bitterness and depression I have had since I came to Wales, in spite of the Henshaw episode and all there has been to annoy me. I am rapidly coming to the conclusion that good and bad spirits are entirely independent of circumstances. Certainly one sometimes (not often, I admit) feels unreasonably cheerful, when one has every cause not to be so, and far more often (at least, in my case) ready to cut one's throat, though one can give no good reason for one's ill-humour.

The weather, at least, gives me nothing to complain of. The sun has shone

almost continuously since I wrote last, and each month in this beautiful country brings new delights. The foxgloves and the ferns are the latest things that have excited my wonder and exultation. I never saw such beauties anywhere else; they are coming up thickly all over the place. I wish I knew the names of all the ferns; there are such quantities of different kinds. I know a few flowers (very few, I begin to think), but in the only part of the country where I ever lived before, there were no ferns but bracken. Here every crevice of wall seems full of them. There is an enchanting little thing, very tiny; Mr. Henshaw says it is called *Trichomenes*.* By-the-way, he has been to call again, and I

* "*Asplenium trichomenes*"—the common wall spleenwort.—Ed.

hit on this happy subject of ferns, and asked him the names of some of them. He seems to know them all.

I can't help rather wishing that in some way the recollection of all that has happened between us could be blotted out, so that he could come and see me naturally and simply. Living alone suits me; I like it, little as any one would have thought I should. But though I like to live alone, some one occasionally to drop in, say about teatime, would be a welcome enhancement of the joys of solitude. I wonder if you realise how utterly alone I do live. Do you take in that for nearly three months I have not had a soul to speak to but Virginie? You try it for three days and see how you like it. Norris made an agreeable little interlude, but it was brief, and its termina-

tion, to say the least, was abrupt. Now, Robert Henshaw would supply just what I want, if only, if only—but there it is. Except for the brief moment when he got on the ferns, he is more awkward and embarrassed than a back-row girl in her first ballet. Yes, I know what you're thinking, that it is a want of all proper pride in me to wish him otherwise, or even to imagine any possibility of pleasure from his society. But, dear, think of the absolute loneliness of my life. I have often been much alone, but never so utterly, entirely, unavoidably alone, "from morn till noon, from noon till dewy eve," day out and in. It is the solitary confinement that breaks down your hard-labour criminals, so they say, not the oakum-picking. I think I shall throw pride to the winds and set about

trying to fascinate this laconic slate-seller.

LETTER XXII

July 8th.

Did I, my dear, say my life was uneventful, or in any way complain of its monotony? If so I humbly take it back and repent. Why should one still desire incidents, after one has reached the dreary knowledge that an incident is usually a misfortune?

Do you read the newspapers? I don't often, but if I do, I see "Railway Accident," "Landslip," "Epidemic of Yellow Fever," "Horrible Murder," "Agrarian Outrage," &c.

Did you ever read anything pleasant or cheerful in a newspaper? I never did. Which is all a digression tending to show that man's best happiness is purely nega-

tive, and consists in escaping the various calamities that are always dropping within a yard or so of his head. From which long preface you will gather that I am in trouble; and if it were not for Mr. Henshaw, I should be in worse trouble still. My poor little dog has met with an accident. He is not used to mountaineering and, though he is fatally venturesome, is quite incapable of taking care of himself. I had climbed up this morning through the wood to the region of rocks and heather just above, and of course Tib came too. I had warned him and scolded him three or four times for rushing off into dangerous places in pursuit of imaginary rabbits. These rocks are full of pitfalls for the unwary. There are fragments looking solid, but really poised one on another

in such a way as to turn under your foot directly you tread on them. Then there are fissures, which go down quite a long way, and are often completely hidden by heather or long trails of bramble. But perhaps the worst kind of trap is the little ledge along the face of a cliff which begins with every appearance of being a genuine path, and gradually narrows till it fades away into the perpendicular rock. It was up one of these places that pug had started gaily without my paying much attention, while I kept along the stretch of level turf at the base of the rock. Suddenly I missed him and whistled, and was answered by a plaintive whine just over my head. I looked up, and there he was, at a good height above me. The ledge, broad at first, and turfed so as to be hardly dis-

tinguishable from the path I was on myself, had narrowed and steepened as it ran up the face of a great boulder, in the manner I have described, till at the point Tib had reached, it ended in a little earth and turf, only kept stuck to the precipitous wall of rock by the roots of a whinbush that somehow or other had found a place to cling to. There stood my little dog, pressing back hard against the rock, his forepaws planted firmly, and shoving away from the edge like a shying horse, his lip curled back with fright, his great eyes goggling more wildly than ever, and his poor body trembling all over. He was too cowed or too silly to try and turn round, and get down the way he got up, and there he was jammed ; and there was I, so close that I could see every hair on his coat, but quite power-

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less to help. It all took a second ; even as I looked and took in the situation, the earth began to give way under the pressure of those tense, shoving paws, and down came the whole thing, bush and dog, and a shower of earth and moss and small stones. I shut my eyes for a moment, and when I opened them he was lying at my feet, apparently quite dead. Above was the torn fringe of earth and bared roots hanging, from which little pebbles and runlets of gravel kept still detaching themselves and trickling down the shoot with a horrid dry sound that smote on my heart in a way I can't describe to you. I picked up the poor little body, quite unconscious, and covered with dirt, and with a thrill of hope found that his heart still beat ; he was not dead, then, and I set off for

home as quickly as I could, thus encumbered, over that steep and uneven path. Even you, kind as you are, would smile if I tried to tell you what I suffered in that short walk that seemed so long, with the body of my poor little friend in my arms. During all the way he never recovered consciousness, and it was only by the faint flutter of his heart under my hand that I knew he was alive. As I walked, and ran, and stumbled down the path, I reflected that I was absolutely ignorant about dogs and their ailments; I hadn't the first idea what to do for him, or how to discover what his hurts were. There was certainly no "vet" nearer than Abergaelau, if there was one even there, which was uncertain, and if I could persuade Mutter to go there, he could not return under two or

three hours. Meanwhile, the dog would die before my eyes, and I should be helpless.

Just as I neared the house I heard myself hailed from behind, and looking back I saw Mr. Henshaw coming swiftly down the path behind me.

"I was coming back from Pantystrathllyn Farm," he explained, "and saw the whole thing. I was just behind you, but you were so absorbed, you neither saw me nor heard me call, and you went so fast, I couldn't overtake you. Let me come in and have a look at the little chap. I know something about dogs, and may be able to help you."

There was something so strong, so cheery, and helpful in his voice, that my heart leapt up at the sound. I felt as I can imagine a religious enthusiast might, who had received a direct answer to

prayer. All other considerations were forgotten in my anxiety.

"Oh, how lucky! how kind! Thank you!" I gasped, and led the way in.

"Put him down there," he said, with calm authority. "Now let's see if any bones are broken. No; I think he's only stunned. Have you any brandy in the house?"

I knew Virginie always kept some; she says it is for "*les tiraillements de l'estomac*," so I ran and got some.

"Now give me a knife; don't be frightened," he added, with a little smile, seeing my horror-stricken face, "I'm not going to perform an operation."

He forced the pug's mouth open with the knife very neatly and dexterously, and poured about half a tumbler, as it seemed to me, of the spirit down his throat. Tib

was agitated by a feeble spasm, and coughed and choked a little.

"I should never have dared to do that," I said, admiringly.

"That's to bring him to," he answered, pleasantly.

Every trace of his former stiffness and shyness had vanished under the influence of doing good service to a fellow creature; the whole man seemed transfigured.

"Now you will have to keep him very quiet; give him a little soup by-and-bye, if he'll take it, but don't try and force him, and don't give him any solid food; you may make him feverish."

"Oh! thank you," I cried, "you are very good; and you don't think he's much hurt."

"He's no limbs broken," he answered;

"more than that I can't say at present ; he's still half stunned, and may not be quite conscious for some hours."

"Is there anything I can do for him?"

"I think you had best leave him alone ; he's sure to be a bit sore and stiff when he comes fully to himself. I'll look in, if I may, to-morrow and see how he is."

"Oh, do !" I assented fervently.

"I'm about the only person in these parts who does know anything about dogs," he continued, half apologetically, with a little return of his old manner.

"It was simply providential my meeting you," I cried ; "I don't know how to thank you enough."

He looked at me curiously a minute. "I am very glad to be of use to you," he said, simply and gravely, and went away. Then I sat down by my little dog and

found relief in tears. That is the second time I have had a good cry after this man has left me, but with what different feelings. I am not a woman that cries easily. These two occasions are the only two I can recall in several years; it is odd that the same person should have been connected with both, and in such different ways. Now I am calming my poor nerves by writing it all out to you. Tib is lying still very quiet, and half stupified, but gently whining a little every now and then. I shall write and tell you how he is to-morrow, and what Mr. Henshaw says about him when he sees him again.

LETTER XXIII

July 10th

I hadn't the heart to write to you yesterday, though I own I said I would

do so in my last letter. I had had such a wretched night, I was quite broken down. I was up the greater part of it with poor pug ; though I could do him no good, I could not lie still in bed, and listen to his groans and cries. The poor thing was evidently in horrible pain all night ; he whined perpetually, and if he tried to move, shrieked aloud. When I tried to help him he actually snapped at me ; he has never done such a thing before in his life. I don't know what to make of it. Mr. Henshaw came up in the morning and comforted me a little about him.

“ I knew he would be sore and stiff,” he said. “ That would be quite enough to account for his crying.”

“ But don't you think,” I asked, “ there may be something more serious than we

suspect—some internal injury, for instance?"

"Of course there may be," he answered, "that is what I meant when I said we couldn't tell exactly yet how much was the matter. But I hope not; as I say, he is bound to have got bruised and knocked about, which would quite account for his screaming."

"And when shall we know?" I asked.

"Well, perhaps not for a day or two, but I hope sooner. And now, will you let me make a suggestion?"

"Of course, I shall be too grateful."

"It's one you won't like. I shouldn't in your place. It is that he would be far more comfortable in the stable than with you."

"The stable!" I cried in horror. "Oh! no, he'd be miserable away from me, you don't know."

“You forget I have dogs, and horses too, and am quite as silly about animals as you can be ; he would care if he was well ; but, as it is, he will be more comfortable in the loose box with plenty of clean straw, than in his little basket that he can’t get out of, and is afraid to let you help him out of.”

“But the stable has not been used ; it is cold, and perhaps damp, and—and, I haven’t got any straw,” I added, literally in this case catching at that proverbial support, as a last excuse.

“I have ventured to tell my groom to bring some up.”

“Surely I could have got some, if it were necessary,” I retorted, rather unreasonably ; after accepting so much, I did not like to be beholden to him for anything more ; the straw once more per-

formed its well-known office, and broke my back, as his precious balms did my head.

“No, you couldn’t,” he answered cheerfully. “I’m the only man in the country who has any; I take it all to pack the slates for shipping; you’d be very much puzzled to find any hereabouts. You see,” he went on, “I was going to propose we should try a hot bath, but it’s essential he shouldn’t catch cold after it; now if we give it him *in* the stable and put him right down in the straw afterwards he can’t. You couldn’t be absolutely certain of keeping him out of draughts in the house; as to the stable being cold, come and see; it’s the best built stable in Wales. Poor old Denbigh was so faddy about his horses; the one place safe from draughts is a loose box.”

So we adjourned to the stable, which I confess I had never before had the curiosity to visit, and found it, to my surprise, swept and garnished, and quite warm ; a little portable stove was burning in one of the boxes, and in the next, a litter of clean straw was invitingly laid with Tib's own drinking vessel in the corner, and in the centre a large tin pan of steaming hot water. Mr. Henshaw's groom was just completing the arrangements.

"Have you got the embrocation, David Evans?" his master asked, as we came in.

The boy answered in Welsh, with such a look as showed me Robert Henshaw was kind to his servants. I am being horribly prolix over this whole episode, but I will get on quicker ; I only want to

give you an idea of the sort of way in which it has come about, and seems quite natural that I should accept so much at the hands of this man. I wish I could convey to you the simple, matter-of-course way in which he made all the arrangements, as though it were the most natural thing in the world. To be brief, we gave Tib his bath, or rather Mr. Henshaw and the groom did, rolled him deftly in flannel, laid him in the straw and covered him up.

“There,” he said, as he wiped his hands, “that’s all for the present ; but you, Mrs. Crofts, you look quite ill ; I’m sure you haven’t slept a wink all night. Now you can be no sort of use to the dog, who will probably go to sleep ; if you will let me prescribe for you, I should suggest your going indoors and following his example. You can’t do him any good,

and it only makes you wretched to see him suffer."

He had been so kind, so helpful, it was impossible to resent his advice ; besides, I felt worn out, and really longed for a little rest. His coming seemed to make the whole thing lighter and easier to bear ; he had not said there was no danger, but somehow the danger appeared less, and more faceable since he had treated it so cheeringly. But after he had been gone some time, and I had tried to eat some breakfast, and had lain down, without getting any sleep, my anxiety got the upper hand again, and I was obliged to go to the stable to see how the invalid was getting on. There lay Tib, just where we had left him, not crying any more, only panting a little, and trembling under his blankets. I suppose I was nervous from

want of sleep, but I thought he looked very weak. Mr. Mutter followed me in, and stood looking down on the poor little palpitating form.

"Robert Henshaw don't know nothin' about dogs," he said, after a little, "no more than they do themselves."

"He seems to know a great deal," I retorted, instantly roused into opposition. "Anyway, he's been most kind and helpful, and I am very grateful to him."

"Very likely he's been kind; I never said he wasn't *kind*; and given as we're *more* ignorant, ignorance may *seem* to us like learning; but it's my belief that dog's spine's injured, and you may boil him till you could make stock of the water and yet do him no good."

"If you've nothing pleasanter to say, you may go away," I replied; "you do

nothing to help me yourself, yet you are jealous of those that do."

"I've helped you more'n you think," I heard the old man grumble to himself, as he moved slowly off; "there'd be precious little Robert Henshaw for you if it hadn't been for me."

I sat down beside my poor little dog, and drew his queer black face on to my knee. He did not take any notice of me, but lay quite still and feeble, only trembling a little. I began to wonder whether this old bird of ill-omen might be right. Mr. Henshaw himself had said he couldn't yet be sure there might not be internal injuries. All my first despondency settled down on me again. Yes, I supposed he would die; everything seemed to happen that way to me. Other people had dogs who lived and flourished

and were a pleasure to them—people who had all sorts of good things, and did not need a dog to love, as I did mine. A sense of my utter loneliness came over me as I sat there in the straw that had been given me by a stranger who at first had been almost an enemy. Tib seemed all I had to care for in the world, and now he was going too. Then I thought of all his strange, silly ways, of his ease-loving, greedy pug nature, and how often he had made me laugh, I who had so little to laugh at in life. I have said I do not cry easily; I begin to think I am really rather a cry-baby; certainly my tears began to drop one by one on the black muzzle that lay unresisting but irresponsible on my lap. Suddenly I heard Mutter say, "She's in there 'long of the dog." And there,

before I could dry my eyes, stood Mr. Henshaw in the box-door, looking down on me with looks of great pity. I scrambled to my feet at once, but there was no concealing the fact that I had been crying. I was mopping my eyes with one hand as I held out the other.

"I came to see how the bath had suited our patient," he said as he took it in his, and at the moment it flashed across me that it was the first time our hands had met; hitherto he had bowed a little coldly, but very politely, when we had met or parted; we had not shaken hands before. He did not seem to notice the difference, but held my hand in a strong large clasp, a second, before releasing it. "You did not take my advice about lying down this morning,

I'm afraid," he said, looking into my face. In spite of all I could do, my tears would come to my eyes again.

"I know I'm silly," I said, without thinking what I was saying, "but he's all I have in the world."

Again he looked at me gravely, pityingly. "Poor child," he said almost under his breath; then, at once relapsing into his cheerful, practical manner, he continued in quite a different voice: "I really don't think you need be uneasy; he was bound to be tired after his bath. You'll find him pounds better in the morning."

"But must I leave him alone all night, poor little man?"

"It will be better you should, if you don't mind."

With that he opened the door of the

stable and I meekly passed out; it was getting quite natural to obey him.

"But suppose," I insisted huskily, "that he should—die in the night, out there, all alone."

"Oh! he's not going to die," he said, cheerfully.

"Mutter said he thought his spine was injured," I persisted.

"If you are going to believe all Mutter says, under the combined stimulus of jealousy at not being consulted, and his general amiable desire to say the pleasant thing, I give you up."

I couldn't help taking comfort from his manner more than his words, and promised to be rational. I have only time and room to add that my poor dear is really better to-day, still very weak, but more like himself, glad to

see his missis, and with a recovered appetite.

LETTER XXIV

July 14th.

Thanks for your dear letter. I knew you would feel for me, but I did not think that you would realize as fully as you have done, all my little dog was to me. You have babies—a possession I don't think I envy you. I only mention them as a reason why you cannot appreciate what her pets are to a childless woman.

My dear is really better, almost well. I didn't know, myself, how much I cared for him, and am rather sorry to have found it out. It adds to the possibilities of sorrow, which I thought the extreme blankness of my life had almost eliminated

from it. I couldn't write again, till I was certain, one way or the other.

Dear Milly, don't laugh at me. And let me say, once for all, that your caution about Mr. Henshaw is *more* than unnecessary. Circumstances have brought it about that he can come and visit me, and I own I'm glad ; wouldn't you be glad in my place? But I am not a schoolgirl, ready to fall in love with every man I meet, or to think that every man is in love with *me*. I have only said this because he is sure to be mentioned often in my letters, if I write as I like to do, simply and fully, and I don't want to have to keep on repeating that our intercourse is quite without *arrière pensée*, each time I write.

There is one thing for which I am specially grateful to him ; I think it shows

that he is a nice man. He has never referred in any way to our first meeting. So many people would have tried to explain or apologise in some way, but he has the sense to see that absolute silence is the only way to treat that unfortunate episode.

You will see from all this that his visits have become quite easy and friendly, and also that he has been several times. I have heard that people at sea become more intimate in a week's voyage than in six months on shore, and I suppose the rapid growth of our—— I have been sitting for nearly five minutes trying to think of the word I want. I was going to say "friendship," but that is too strong a word. At least I don't suppose he would like me to call myself his friend.

LETTER XXV

July 24th.

How good of you, dear, to miss my letters, and reproach me for not writing. No, nothing is the matter, but I have been bored with myself, and did not wish to pass the feeling on to you. You once praised me for not being morbid, "for waiting," as you expressed it, "till the rain was over and the sun out again, before I took up my pen;" and I feared to forfeit this good opinion if I went on perpetually prosing about myself and so decided to be silent for a time.

Perhaps the decision was a little influenced by my reading Rousseau's "Confessions," which I have found among some books of my father's. It seems as though people must always be rather

offensive who are writing about themselves, doesn't it? It is all very well for Jean Jaques to say, "I will lay bare my innermost feelings, and humanity shall be my judge," but it argues a large share of self-conceit to suppose that the spectacle will interest humanity at all. Besides, it is all nonsense to talk about absolute sincerity. We can't help trying to get the jury on our side.

Do you think any one is really independent of what his fellow-men think of him? I can't imagine sitting down to write confessions, and not making the best appearance possible. Why, I am conscious that at a certain crisis of my life, some time ago, I wilfully posed even to you, and pretended much more indifference than I really felt. I daresay you saw through the subterfuge of my poor pride ;

but there it was—I deliberately tried to take you in, and yet you would think if any one ever could be absolutely truthful, I could, in writing to you. And I think my feeling was on the whole a natural and becoming one: I doubt very much if it would be a good thing, even were it feasible, to lay bare one's innermost soul for the inspection of posterity. Depend upon it, it is mostly vanity that makes us wish to do so—not honesty—as a woman cuts her dress too low, who thinks she has a pretty skin. If Phryne had pretended that she took her clothes off, from a disinterested desire to forward art or science; and had modestly added that she had not attempted to conceal any imperfections, because she thought that the exhibition to be interesting must be complete, I, for one, should not have believed her. It seems

to me that there is a moral, as well as a physical decency, and that Jean Jaques's invitation to the public to come and inspect his innermost feelings is just as immodest as Phryne's little flourish in the law courts.

And yet, after all, this desire to be taken at our own valuation, as it were, by our fellow creatures, is a very natural one, and at the root, I suspect, of most writing, whether avowedly autobiographical or not.

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I return to you after dinner. Once having begun to write again, I feel as though I had so much to say; and yet I have nothing to tell you worth recording. Robert Henshaw came in just as I was writing the above, and I told him what I had been saying, and asked if he didn't agree with it. He has so much dignity

and reserve that I felt sure of his feeling as I did about this. But to my surprise he rather took the other line.

"I don't think it is vanity, Mrs. Crofts," he said gently, "that makes people want to write about themselves, so much as the longing for human sympathy. No one can help wanting to break down the terrible wall of isolation that surrounds each one of us. You are happy enough to know some one who will understand; and so you write letters. Those who do not possess such a friend, are driven to write books, in the hope of reaching some one, though they may never know they have done so."

"Yes," I said, kindling at the thought of you, "I have a truly sympathetic friend; and you are right. I take advantage of the fact, to hold forth to her

about myself, with all the egoism I have just been condemning in others."

"And who is the favoured correspondent to whom you write such interesting letters," he asked. It was the first question he had ever put to me about myself or my surroundings, and I noticed it. Beyond the fact that you were an angel from heaven, I did not tell him much about you; I thought he seemed pleased, and a little surprised at my having such a respectable friend.

"No one ever writes to *me* about Rousseau," he said. "You must be a delightful correspondent. I supposed letter-writing was a lost art, that it died early in the present century."

"People who have anything else to do have no time for writing," I answered; "but you see I have nothing else to do."

"Why don't you write a book then?" he asked.

"I am afraid I could not write a good one; and you have just told me I have no excuse for doing so, having my opportunity for self-expression already."

"Of course it's presumptuous of me to pretend to know," he went on, "but I have a conviction that you could write a very good book if you tried. Perhaps I am less fortunate in my friends than you; anyway I have always felt a desire to write a book; but I've no time, whereas you have plenty of time."

"Yes," I answered, a little wearily, "God knows I have plenty of time."

"Lady Clara Vere de Vere," he quoted, half laughing,

"If time hang heavy on your hands,
Are there no beggars at your gate,
Nor any poor about your lands?"

"You see that hardly applies to *me*," I retorted, "and as for the 'orphan boy' and 'girl,' I presume that nowadays they are taught to read and sew in a properly conducted Board school. If I prayed Heaven for anything it would be for a rather *less* 'human heart,' and, I assure you, the 'foolish yeoman' goes on his way quite unmolested by me."

Then we both thought of Norris, and an awkward pause ensued. At last, with a little effort, he took the bull by the horns.

"I heard from Norris yesterday," he said. "I hope you have quite forgiven me for my share in that stupid business ; remember I didn't know you then."

He spoke very humbly, almost pleadingly, and my heart was softened.

"Yes," I said, "I think I have forgiven

you. I suppose you thought you were doing right. Besides, have you not atoned?"

"Don't say that," he said eagerly. "It sounds as if you thought me capable of supposing I could buy my pardon; I don't want to owe your forgiveness to any obligation you may fancy you are under to me."

"But you see, whether you like to be reminded of it or not, you have done me so many good offices that I can't help being grateful to you. It is not that you rescued me from starvation at the hands of the happy Welsh peasantry whom you were just now recommending to my charity, but you have saved the life of the one thing I have to love in the world, which is a quite different class of service."

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"By the way, how is the patient?" he enquired.

"Do you think I should have let you talk on indifferent subjects all this time," I answered, "if he had not been going on well?"

Then we sent for Tib who was visiting Virginie, and inspected him together. Mr. Henshaw has quite won the little dog's heart. I am rather jealous. He was softly stroking him, and Tib was squirming, and sidling, and making absurd noises, as he does when he is emotional.

"I never expected to care for a pug," Mr. Henshaw remarked. "How came you to have a pug?"

"Well, I never expected to have a dog at all," I answered, "but Geor—I mean some one I knew, a friend of mine, thought no one could live without one, and the

pug was a sort of concession to my weakness, as being as little like a dog as a dog well could be."

Mr. Henshaw went on stroking Tib thoughtfully.

I fancied he glanced at me a little sharply when I made that stupid stumble over George's name.

LETTER XXVI

July 26th.

I wonder if I *have* entirely forgiven Robert Henshaw the pain he made me suffer at our first meeting. I told him I had, but I am by no means sure of it myself. It is horribly vulgar of me, but I sometimes feel as though it would be a pleasant revenge if I could make him fall in love with me—no—I know what you will say, but you're wrong. I don't think

there would be any danger to me in the experiment. I have had the complaint young, and got over it. I am no more likely to fall in love than I am to have the measles, or any other juvenile ailment. Of course I know that middle-aged people do sometimes have the measles, and then it is very dangerous; they die of it. But the cases are rare. And I am terribly middle-aged.

Old as I am, I hate to be unsuitably dressed, and I wish you would tell me what you wear in the country. You know how chilly I am, and it is far too damp here, except on a few favoured days, to wear cottons. I feel a fool, in these solitudes, in my pretty old French dresses, and that last year's white flannel is worn and washed out of all shape, till I am ashamed to have Mr. Henshaw, or any

one else, see me in it. My present life is certainly economical; there is no temptation, even to me, with my passion for dress, to lavish much on the adornment of my person.

You can't think how pretty the garden is as the summer goes on. All sorts of things grow here, that I have not seen out of doors, much further south; in a sheltered corner there is even a myrtle which shows some signs of blooming, and hydrangeas are all over the place, not little plants in pots, with one big head, like a figure in a caricature, but great bushes five or six feet high, and covered with blooms of a lovely pale blue; I wonder if being so near the sea has anything to do with it. The fuchsias, too, are glorious. I have always thought of a fuchsia as a little pot thing in a window, and I find them here

as shrubs, almost trees, the whole plant, flowers, leaves, and wood, glowing red, burning and not consumed, till I am tempted to take off my shoes to them.

LETTER XXVII

July 29th.

We have had a great deal of rain lately, not enough to fulfil Mr. Mutter's awful warnings about July as the wet season, but enough to lend a kind of rainbow glory to the fine days, when they do come, such as they never have in drier places. When we had a spell of fine weather, last month, the wind was in the east, and all the colour went out of the hills, but on a day like to-day they gleam with the tints of the opal. A new beauty is added to them lately, by the heather coming into bloom, which, mixed with the now rare patches of

gorse, gives a quite indescribable tone to some of the rocks and foot-hills. Have I dwelt before on the healing powers of the country? I daresay I repeat myself dreadfully. I am aware that the discovery of there being a balm in Nature is not exactly an original one, but I am soothed and quieted by all the beauty round me. I was not meant for a nervous or morbid woman. I am sure the foundation of my character is a placid, sterling common-sense, and when I most truly find myself, I get down to it again.

I seem to have got the one thing which I told you was wanting to my life here, a congenial friend to drop in occasionally and cheer my solitude. Mr. Henshaw's society is a great addition to the charms of the place; he comes nearly every day to see me, and we have long talks on all

kinds of subjects. He seems to me the most just and even-minded man I ever met: in some ways he reminds me of my father, but papa had more prejudices, and was far less patient under contradiction. When I don't agree with Mr. Henshaw I say so frankly, and we differ about many things. He is full of little kind offices and neighbourly acts. The other day, when I was talking about the garden to him, and expressing my admiration of the way things grew here, he offered to give me lots of things from his borders in the autumn, and seemed quite surprised and disappointed when I said I should very likely not be here so long.

So you see I am in a serene mood, at last, and sailing on a halcyon stream; I hope I shan't get fat—not that it matters much—now.

LETTER XXVIII

July 31st.

Mr. Henshaw and I have had such a curious conversation, that I must try and record it for your benefit while it is fresh in my mind. I don't pretend to report these long talks word for word; who could? But you will get more idea of the form of it, if I give it you in dialogue, and as near as I can remember in the words we used. I hope you won't be shocked at our discussing such matters; it has come to seem quite natural to me to talk out whatever I am thinking about with him. I have so long wanted to know just such a man, in this easy natural way, and with no question of sentiment, that now he has come, I find myself bursting with things I want to say to him. On this

particular occasion the subject of my thoughts was quite prosaic. I had been reflecting on what a good cook Virginie was—that is an alarming sign that youth is over. I never cared what I ate when I was young, and people who talked about food disgusted and bored me. Well, as we grow older, we learn to appreciate creature-comforts. I find a solid unalloyed gratification in the pleasures of the table which is balm to Virginie's artistic soul. It used to be a dreadful trouble to her formerly that her finest efforts were thrown away upon me. Such being the theme of my meditations, I mentioned it to Mr. Henshaw when he came in, and we laughed over my greediness together, and from that we got on to the question of whether it would be compromising for him to come and dine with me. He

has never been here in the evening as yet.

"It is entirely for you to decide," I told him. "*My* character is not very important to me, if you will promise to prevent the natives stoning me, in case I outrage their notions of propriety."

"I am afraid the Welsh notions of propriety are not always as strict as they might be," he answered, "but I don't like to hear you talk in that way about yourself."

"Remember," I retorted, "that you were the first to point out to me that my reputation was not intact in these parts."

"Don't," he said piteously. "Why will you say everything that I don't like to-day?"

"I'm sorry to do that," said I, "but you happen to dislike so much that I say."

"I dislike to hear you talk as if you were one of a class, with whom you have nothing in common."

"A class, a class!" I repeated. "I have that in common with them, that makes them a class; you generalise about a class, as though all women who have what is called 'gone wrong' were exactly the same. Yet the moment it is a question of one whom you know, and perhaps like a little, you say in the same breath that she has nothing in common with them; you haven't even the courage of your opinions."

"Very likely not," he responded meekly. "I don't aspire to being consistent; but don't you think it is an awkward subject for us to discuss."

"On the contrary," I cried eagerly, "it is one I have long wanted an oppor-

tunity to talk over with some fair-minded man, because I have thought a great deal about it, and have no one I can tell my thoughts to. Let us leave me and my past out of the question, and discuss it on purely impersonal grounds, as though we were two men."

"It is not easy to think of you as a man," he answered, smiling. "You are so unlike a man."

"But I am almost equally unlike any woman you have ever known; you said so yourself."

"Yes. In some ways, I suppose, you are not as good as the few women I have known intimately; in others you seem to me above them all."

"That is a great compliment when one thinks of the unpardonableness of the one female sin from the male point of view;

but tell me, do you still care what people have *done*, so long as they *are* nice. I find there is very little I can't forgive as I get older. If people are agreeable and kind to me, I care less and less what crimes they may have committed."

"I don't find it so easy to get rid of my sense of right and wrong," he answered. "If our liking for our fellow-men were a mere animal attraction, it might be simple enough. But surely we are first drawn to them because we think they possess certain qualities; and if we find they don't, it must make a difference in our feeling towards them."

"Well," I said, "perhaps it is a sense of my own shortcomings that makes me charitable, but I can't put myself into the frame of mind of the person who feels obliged to throw over a friend who has

done something of which he disapproves."

"Ah! there I daresay we agree. I think when I am really fond of any one, he would have to do something very bad before I would give him up. But surely it is a disappointment to you, when some one you like and respect, falls short of what you have imagined him, commits some act which you think unworthy of him. However wide our charity, some qualities must be antipathetic to us; there must always be something we hate, and if a person we love does it, it can't be indifferent to us."

"If people only did things we didn't mind, there would be nothing to forgive," I said weakly, conscious that my remark was not argument.

"I wasn't saying that there was *any*-

thing we couldn't *forgive*," he answered "What you began by asserting was that you didn't *care* what people did, and I am trying to show you that you inevitably do. I know you hate meanness, for instance ; well, if some one you thought incapable of meanness did a thoroughly mean thing, wouldn't it alter your feelings towards him ?"

"Yes," I said after some hesitation (for who likes to admit conviction), "put like that, I can't say but you are right. There *are* some things that I should be sorry to have any one do whom I cared about."

"Well, then: can't you see that I may feel in the same way about certain other things, that you consider unimportant?"

"What I do see," I retorted, being thus cornered, "is that Socrates must have

been a very unpleasant old man. I never felt so sorry for the Sophists before."

"Do you read Plato?" he asked, with undisguised astonishment.

"Dear me, no; of course I don't read anything. But I don't see why you need be so surprised if I did. Aspasia was a very well-read woman."

Then there was a pause. We were sitting in the garden, just where I was, when Norris made his sudden irruption into my life; how long ago it seems, and yet it is really only a few weeks. Mr. Henshaw didn't say anything; but I am developing a preternatural power of knowing intuitively when I have annoyed him; the desire to shock him gets too strong for me sometimes, but I am always sorry when I have done so. Still, I did not like abandoning my guns.

"We have wandered away from our original question," I said, after a little while. "What I want to know is, if you still hold the old-fashioned view that a woman who has lost her virtue may not be a very good sort of woman in other ways. It always strikes me that the general sentiment about these things is grossly unfair to my sex. A man may do almost anything, and still be thought a very good fellow (and be so too), and I can't see why the same tolerance should not be extended to women. I suppose men laid down the laws originally on this subject, and so made them conveniently for themselves."

"There is, no doubt, something in that view," he said, with a little smile; "but I think it is more a matter of experience. I am far from admitting your premiss that

‘a man may do almost anything’; but we have all known men whose private lives were by no means without reproach, who have not only been ‘good fellows,’ as you say, but useful citizens and servants of the public; whereas it would be difficult to find any instance of a woman, of anything like the same sort of life, who had not suffered a corresponding deterioration all round.”

“But are you not mixing up cause and effect?” I urged. “Isn’t it because a man knows he may do certain things with impunity, in the eyes of his fellow-men, that he does not lose self-respect; while the woman, on the other hand, realising that she is looked on as a pariah, grows reckless and throws restraint to the wind?”

“Perhaps so, but it is so hard to settle

what is cause and what effect in such things."

"Another thing that tells hardly on my sex," I went on, "is the distinction you drew just now between a man's public and his private life. Women, as a rule, have no public life in which they can still do well. Those who have such ways of expressing themselves to the world, such, for instance, as a great writer or singer, can have love affairs as a man does, and yet not grow coarse or perverted."

"Such instances may be, but they are rare ; and what you say of the majority of women having only a private life, surely makes for my view, that they should be the more careful to keep it clean, having no other by which to redeem it. I don't mean to say, for a moment, that a woman who has once stepped out of the path of

conventional virtue must necessarily be a bad woman."

"Thank you," I couldn't help interjecting. He stopped short and looked at me in the way that makes me shudder.

"I thought," he said quietly, "that you wished us to discuss the question on purely impersonal grounds."

"So I do," I cried; "it slipped out; I couldn't help it. To show you forgive me, go on and finish your sentence."

He hesitated a moment, and then continued. "What I was going to say was that it was quite possible for a woman to make one false step without altering her nature; but, once let her think lightly of virtue, I don't see what is to prevent her, when she is tired of the first man, from going on to a second, and so from

one to another till her downfall is complete."

I can't remember what I answered. I daresay I still endeavoured to fight the Pharisees, like Samson, with the jaw of an ass (no, by the way, it was the Philistines). But I am sure I said nothing worth repeating; for in my heart I could not but acknowledge the truth of what he said; and the outlook which it opened up to me for the future was a somewhat dreary one—the alternative of perpetual loneliness, or else such a gradual deterioration as he described, with the prospect of becoming in the end like some of those women I have known. It occurs to me that there is yet just one other way out of the situation; and that is rehabilitation by marriage, a somewhat flat conclusion, perhaps, for one who has railed against

that institution, and ridiculed its votaries. And even if *I* could bring myself to look favourably on such a step, there is a second person necessary to the contract, whom I fancy it would be by no means easy to find.

LETTER XXIX

TANFRRWS, *August 4th.*

I ought not to have used the word Pharisees; it has clearly given you a wrong impression.

Robert Henshaw is not a "prig;" at least not my idea of what is meant by that vague term. I once heard a party of people asked to define a prig. No one had a definition, but they all offered to give instances. After four of them had named the same young man, whom they happened to dislike, I said I thought the

game was ill-natured, and we would play something else.

You asked me what we decided about dinner. Mr. Henshaw is coming to dine with me on Thursday. There, isn't that an excitement? Now comes the important question, what I shall wear on this solemn occasion. Every evening when I am alone, I wear a soft grey sort of dressing-gown, of nun-like simplicity, lined with white silk, which Virginie cut out and I made; but I don't think that is good enough. I have put away, among many other pretty things, a lovely tea-gown, which was made for me in Paris, copied from an old picture. It is a white brocade covered with bunches of grapes and soft pink rosebuds in their natural colours, and lined with tender *feuille de rose morte*; it is loose, and worn over an

under-dress of palest blue, draped with India muslin and old lace. It is open at the throat and arms, with a fichu and big ruffles of the lace, and I used to wear it with my hair dressed high, and a blue ribbon round my throat. I think I shall drag it from its retirement and try it on. Mr. Henshaw has never seen me prettily dressed, and I feel I should like to make a sensation. The double prospect of a chance of displaying her culinary skill, and of seeing me dressed up fine, has so elated Virginie that she has renewed her youth, and I hear her singing in a strange cracked old voice: "A la pêche des moules, je ne veux plus aller mamman," and another song something about "Cueillir les fraises, au Bois de Bayeux, quand on est deux, quand on est deux."

There is a big heliotrope growing

against the wall of the house, under the little porch or verandah, and the scent of it comes in at the window as I write. I never smell heliotrope without thinking of a little episode in the very early days of George's devotion. I happened to say one day that I loved the scent, but that they were not good flowers to wear because they faded so quickly. He left orders at a florist's to send me a little fresh bunch every two hours, till I stopped it. Nobody would do that for me now. I wonder if he does that kind of thing for Lady Medmenham!

LETTER XXX

Friday.

You will want to hear all about the dinner, dear, and so you shall. Mr. Mutter came to me while I was cutting

some dead roses off the bushes near the house. After watching me scornfully for a little (my attempts at gardening always provoke his derision), he asked :

“Do you want anything special in the way of vegetables to-day. I hear you’ve got Robert Henshaw comin’ to dinner with yer. There’s a few late peas in the garden, enough for a dish, and he likes peas. Mrs. Virginny she used to come abothering, wanting this and that to make a ‘plar,’ till I was forced to tell her this wasn’t Covent Garden and she must be content with what there was. But if you wants anything special you can name it; there’s the peas, and there’s vegetable marrows, and there’s French beans. I don’t know as there’s much else; we’ve got some cucumbers, but they’re dreadful small and poor.”

I was touched at Mr. Mutter's interest in my entertainment, but I don't know how much of it is for my sake, and how much to do honour to the garden in the eyes of "them Henshaws."

I had arranged with Virginie that I should dress early in order that she might superintend the operation, and then be left free to give her undivided mind to the dinner ; so at seven o'clock I descended in all my majesty, with a terrible hour to get through somehow before the arrival of my guest. I certainly was looking very nice ; Virginie had fairly crowed over the results of her labours ere she departed to the kitchen. I looked at myself in the glass, and felt pleasantly elated. Then I sat down to read a book.

I don't know if you feel as I do about it, but it is impossible for me to do anything

in an interval, that is to say to fill up the time till something else happens. I must believe that what I am about is to be my last occupation till Doomsday, or I can't even read a novel. So after a very short period, I put down the book and looked at the clock; not much more than ten minutes had passed. The clock standing in front of the looking-glass, by a not unnatural transition my eyes wandered again to my own image. "It is a tea-gown," I said half aloud, "only a tea-gown, though it's a smart one; I've dined quite alone with George in it, scores of times." I was answering certain half-formed doubts in my own mind. I wished I hadn't dressed so early. By dispensing with Virginie's assistance I might have put on my own clothes at any hour that suited me. Now, I felt like the child who is dressed first of

the family, for a party; and began to realise why those who find themselves in this trying position often burst into unexplained floods of tears before the carriage comes and their luckier sisters make their appearance. I wished I had never asked Robert Henshaw to dinner at all, and I felt I had been a fool to dress myself up. "If it were Norris," I thought, "he would be dazzled by my fine appearance, with no after-thought of its unsuitableness. But what will a man like Mr. Henshaw think of my tricking myself out like this to receive him." I tried to tell myself that I didn't care what he thought, that I had a right to wear what I liked in my own house, that I had put on my best tea-gown for my own satisfaction, and not his. It was no good. I felt a fool, and was getting more and more depressed.

Finally I could stand it no longer. It was just five minutes to eight. I tore upstairs and dragged off the brocade and lace, leaving it in a heap on the floor where it had fallen. I had no time to alter my hair, but I plunged into my grey thing, that I wore every evening, and arrived at the bottom of the stairs, flushed and panting, just as my visitor turned the handle of the door opposite to me. It was only then that I thought of the awful shock I was going to cause my poor old maid, but retreat was impossible. There was the enemy drawn up in battle array; the Rubicon was behind me.

“How unpleasant of me to come exactly at the time you named,” he was saying. “In the course of a long business career I have contracted vicious habits of punctuality, for which I am never

tired of apologising. I have made you hurry."

"I went up to change my things rather late," I stammered, "I was interested in my book."

We went into the drawing-room. Presently I heard a door open, then Virginie's step in the passage. I turned hot all over. "Madame est servie," she began in her most magnificent manner. Then she fell back against the door she was holding open.

"Mon Dieu!" she ejaculated. "Est-ce un rêve?"

"Mamselle Sibylle," she whispered, as I passed her trying to look natural and unconcerned. "Comment avez vous pu? cette loque!!"

All through dinner, in the intervals of bringing in her little culinary triumphs, her

eye would wander up and down me, with a reproach that I felt in my marrow.

Her disappointment had not in the least affected her cookery; at least *her* share of the entertainment was *sans reproche*, however grievously I had failed in mine. Robert delighted her by eating a great deal, and praising everything; by the end of the repast the cook had consoled the *femme de chambre*, and she was glowing with well deserved self-satisfaction.

We sat in the porch after dinner and Virginie brought out our coffee to us. I was afraid he would be rather horrified at my cigarette; he had never seen me smoke before. I had been in two minds about doing it, but decided to do as I always did. I handed him the box and we smoked a little in silence. Then he

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remarked: "I'm so glad you didn't ask me if I should be shocked."

"You don't know how nearly I did," I answered.

"Ah! that would have spoilt it, and been like other people, and so unlike you."

"I don't think I go in for being eccentric."

"No. The comfort with you is that I really believe you don't 'go in' for anything."

"You think I'm natural; but I'm not. I admire naturalness above everything, but it's not natural to me to be natural; I'm too self-conscious. I hate affectation, but can't help being affected. I have to think out what would be natural to me, and come back to it by a sort of double affectation. I'm not spontaneous."

The idea seemed to amuse him. "Well," he said, "surely there is more merit in that than in being like most simple people, who are so just because they are so, and couldn't be otherwise."

I didn't agree with him, but did not care to discuss the point. The night was too lovely for argument, and I gave myself up to contemplation.

The moon had risen and was flooding the landscape at our feet. A mist like a thin veil lay in the valley out of which the low hills rose with a weird distinctness: the distant estuary shone like a streak of silver.

"I am so glad there is a moon to-night," I said. "This view never looks so perfect as by moonlight. And it is odd that, after a time, one wants some one to show a thing to; one can't go on enjoying anything, however beautiful, alone."

Perhaps my voice sounded more pathetic on the last word than I intended.

"You must be very lonely," he said pityingly.

"Yes," I said, "sometimes ; but I am amazed at my own powers of living alone. I came here for solitude and it has done me good ; but of course once in a way I do rather long for a footprint on the sand."

"I know," he said thoughtfully, "I am lonely too. You can't think what a variety an evening like this is in my life."

I felt some of the annoyance of the old woman who has been detailing her own symptoms, when the sympathetic friend departs from the *rôle* of commiseration and says, "I know well what it is, my dear. I have it too."

"Oh! you!" I said, "If you live a

lonely life it must be because you want to. You can go away, or have people to see you ; and then you have your cousins at the Plás."

The mention of his relations seemed to strike a discordant note in the harmony of the evening. There was a little pause. Then he said :

"By the way, my aunt and the girls are coming home next week."

"How will your aunt like to find you on visiting terms with me?" I asked. "She will think you have gone over to the enemy."

"I am not accountable to my aunt for all my actions," he said with a shade of loftiness. "Besides," he added laughing, "Mrs. Henshaw is a humane woman, she would not wish me to have left you to starve ; when I tell her the circumstances, she will say I was right."

"But about your cousin, when he comes home? She won't want him to come here any more than formerly, but it will be harder than ever to convince him that what is quite right for you is all wrong for him."

He looked thoughtful and took refuge in the long and careful lighting of another cigarette, as men always do when they have nothing to say.

"Yes! I foresee complications," he said at last. "I wish you hadn't put my family into my head, I was enjoying myself so thoroughly."

"Of course the whole situation has become more complicated," I went on remorselessly. "As long as none of you came here, I was simply an obscure individual, whom the great people of the neighbourhood did not know. Even your

cousin's visits didn't make much difference. Boys run into all sorts of places, their families know nothing of. But now that you, who are the real, if not the nominal, head of the family have been here on quite intimate terms, won't it seem funny that your aunt shouldn't know me? And of course she can't. I see that, for nothing is changed, except your opinion of me."

"Our acquaintance has been an odd one from the beginning when you think of it," he answered. "I should have been surprised, on my first visit to you, if any one had told me how comfortably I should be sitting here with you in so short a time."

"It is your kindness that has made it possible," I said.

"No," he answered, "it is Fate. But if there has been kindness, it has been

yours. It was far harder for you to accept any little services I may have been able to do you, than for me to offer them, though to be sure I felt shy enough when I thought what a fool I had made of myself at our first meeting."

"Perhaps after all," I said, as a sense of the difficulties ahead came over me, "it would have been better if circumstances had not brought us together again, and things had stayed as they were."

"Oh! no, don't say that," he said eagerly. Then he stopped himself—and added in a very low voice, so that I hardly caught the words, "you may be right, perhaps it would have been better if we had never met."

I did not ask him to explain himself, and he went away soon afterwards.

I suppose, now, these pleasant breaks in

my life are over, and that I shall see as little of him as at first. I forgot to tell you that, during dinner, before I started the subject of his family, he had asked me if I should not like to see their quarries, and on my eagerly assenting, had promised to take me there some day. That, too, will probably never be now. I almost wish the Henshaws had stayed away a little longer. And yet they had to come sooner or later, and perhaps it is as well it should be sooner.

LETTER XXXI

Sunday, August 10th.

Mr. Henshaw has been to make his *visite de digestion*, and what do you think we have been talking about? We have been discussing theology—at least we very nearly have, but not quite.

There has come in a spell of really hot weather with this month's moon, and no rain to speak of, and a special Sunday peace seemed to have settled down upon the valley, which even in the week is more peaceful than any other corner of the earth. Tib lay in the blazing sunshine and snored joyfully. There was a shimmer of heat above the grass, and the hum of innumerable insects in the air. From the "Moriah" in the village came the sound of singing, strangely distinct in the afternoon hush. The Welsh are very musical and have lovely voices, and they sing their hymns in harmony, not in unison as in an English church.

"You would not hear such good singing as that in places of much greater pretension, in England," I said. "Time and tune both perfect, and with no accompaniment."

"Listen," he said. "How still it is! One can almost hear the words." We sat and listened till the end of the hymn: as the last notes died away, Mr. Henshaw gave a little sigh. "There is a great charm about Sunday," he said. "Shouldn't you be sorry to have Sunday done away with?"

"Yes, very," I answered, "though my affection for it is mostly æsthetic, for in my own life it does not differ much from other days. I don't even wear better clothes."

"Ah!" he said, "that is because you are not a worker: if you toiled for six days of the week, you would know what it is to have the seventh a holiday."

"I have known what it was to work very hard at one period of my career," said I. "Quite enough fully to appreciate Sunday from that point of view."

"From no other?" he asked with a sudden eagerness.

I wondered if he were leading up to an inquiry into the state of my soul. "I am not a religious woman." I admitted unwillingly, for I do not like discussing these subjects.

"You must be a very happy one," he said softly, "to be able to do without religion in a world where so much is sad and puzzling."

"No, I'm not. But it has been precisely at the moments when the world was saddest to me, that I have found the least help in religion; and it has not seemed to me to make it less puzzling to be called on for assent to a number of unthinkable things."

"To me," answered Mr. Henshaw, in a low, awed voice, "the one unthinkable

thing is the existence of a godless universe." He spoke almost as though the assertion were forced from him against his will.

"Well," I retorted, "I didn't say *what* the unthinkable things were ; perhaps that was one of them : to reject is as much an act of faith as to accept. I neither affirm nor deny ; I simply try not to think about what no amount of thinking can make me know or understand."

I had screwed up my courage for a defence of my own views ; but if I expected a battle, it was soon evident that Mr. Henshaw was by no means inclined for combat.

"After all," he said, relapsing into his ordinary manner, "when you come to think of it, I daresay there isn't much difference between our points of view. It

seems to me quite impossible that certain things should not be, and to you quite possible that they may be ; and as neither of us can give any very convincing reason for the faith, or want of it, that is in us, what is the use of argument ? ”

A cold chill of apprehension had seized on me when I thought the subject of religion was to be forced on me whether I would or no ; but, somehow, as the enemy retreated, I experienced a quite irrational disappointment, and a sudden desire to oblige him to define his position. I don't think I felt pugnacious : it was part of the new-born wish, that I described to you, to talk over, with an understanding and fair-minded man, certain things which my life has, hitherto, afforded me few opportunities of discussing. But try as I would, I could extort nothing from him but the bare

reluctant statement with which he had begun the conversation, that some sort of a religion seemed to him a necessity for men and women in this world. He was evidently sorry that he had started the subject at all ; and, even while it stimulated my curiosity, I could not but respect his unwillingness to ventilate his most sacred convictions. Even a little side sneer which I let drop in the hope of provoking a retort, about his exemplary regularity in attending church, only elicited a very gentle defence.

“I go simply to the place of worship that I was brought up to attend,” he said ; “first, because it is as good an expression to me as any other, of what I hold to be a vital truth, and is consecrated for me by memory and association ; and, secondly, because my not going there would be a

stumbling-block to those who are dearest to me. Do you think I am wrong?"

"On the contrary," I answered, with a cordiality which surprised myself, "I think you are very right; and all you have said makes me like and respect you more."

"But I dislike talking of these things at all," he continued, in a manner that made my curiosity seem suddenly vulgar and impertinent to myself. It irritated me to find myself put in the wrong.

"I doubt if you can dislike it more than I do," I answered. (You see the sceptical turn of my mind.) "For I have a morbid terror of being led into talking seriously and truthfully on any of the great subjects of life."

"I don't call that morbidness," he said, "I call it refinement."

"Ah! well," I answered, lightly; "if

one is not refined, it is a good thing to have the sort of morbidness which some people mistake for refinement."

Here the singing began again, and we sat as before, and listened to it in silence. It is a great advance in intimacy, when you can sit without talking to a person, and not feel any awkwardness. At the close of this second hymn, Mr. Henshaw rose to go.

"I was just going away," he said, "without mentioning the principal object of my visit. You said the other night you had never seen a quarry, and seemed inclined to consent to my suggestion that you should let me show you ours; so I came to tell you that I had got to go up there on Tuesday, and to ask if you would give me the pleasure of taking you."

Now he had told me Mrs. Henshaw

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and her daughters were to return next Wednesday, and it was at once obvious to me, firstly, that he wished our visit to the quarry to be an accomplished fact before his aunt's arrival; and, secondly, that he was making polite phrases, so that I might think he was not fulfilling a promise out of a stern sense of honour, but really wanted me to go. He knew far too much about my life for me to be able to make even the thinnest pretence of an engagement. So I answered with caution :

“Oh! Mr. Henshaw, how good of you to remember my wish; but do you think it is really feasible? Shan't I be dreadfully in the way, if you are going up on business?”

“My business consists of two words to the overseer, which I could write as well as not; but I like from time to time to go

over the works myself, and see that things are in order, and the safety of the men properly attended to. You can't think how reckless they get, and what silly things they do. I shouldn't like to tell you how many accidents we have every year; and it is only due to my perpetual goading of the men that we have fewer than any other quarry of the size in Wales. Now I haven't been up for some time, so I should go anyway, whether you came or not, and I can make my little tour of inspection just as well with you as alone, and far more pleasantly. What more can I say to make you come?"

"Listen to me, Mr. Henshaw," I said, "and I will tell you the truth." It wasn't a bit because I thought I should be in your way that I hesitated. But won't it lead to fresh trouble if I go driving about

the country with you, and even invade the family quarry in your company? You know you have arranged this expedition for Tuesday so that it may be over before your aunt arrives; that shows that you know what she would think of it."

"Mrs. Crofts," he answered, "you're much too clever; you see through everything. But since you have been frank, so will I be. If this could do you any harm, I wouldn't propose it; but not one of our few neighbours ever enters the valley, except to call at the Plás, and there is no danger of that just now, because it is well known that there is no one there. Not a soul will meet us except a child or two, and the people employed in the quarry, and they won't think, or if they do, I don't care. Probably some one will tell my aunt; but what does it matter? She's got

to hear about my visits to you, and that won't please her anyhow. Those visits have become the pleasantest things in my immensely dull life. You, like everybody else, think of me as a money-grubbing machine, immersed in business, and with no wants beyond it. Sometimes I get almost sick of being the good and sensible man, and doing what is best for every one. You and I are not a boy and girl; we may be safely trusted to spend an hour or two together. Anyway, I've set my heart on this little lark. It's not a very reprehensible one. Won't you let me have it?"

So what could I do, but say I'd go? If I had persisted in my refusal, it would have looked as if I were afraid to trust myself with him.

LETTER XXXII

Tuesday morning.

I will begin a letter to you, dear, while I am waiting for Mr. Henshaw to call for me. It is a simply perfect day, brilliant and hot, and almost cloudless; I feel as excited as a girl at the prospect of my jaunt, and can settle to nothing. It rained last night and I nearly cried, thinking it was going to be a bad day to-day, and that we should not be able to go. I suppose it is silly, but I feel in the highest spirits. After all, why shouldn't one allow oneself a few hours of happiness sometimes, if it comes in one's way? "My bosom's lord sits lightly on his throne." The sun shines, and the flowers give a pleasant scent. I have fastened a cluster of the little monthly roses into my

dress, and put on my most becoming hat, and I look charming; and I am once more going to drive in a vehicle with springs, behind a good horse, and with the only nice or amusing man within a hundred miles. And I'm glad I hear the wheels of his chariot. I will finish to-night.

Wednesday.

I didn't write last night after all. And I don't know now if I can give you any account of yesterday's expedition. Something happened which I've half a mind not to tell you. I spent all yesterday evening trying to make up my mind whether I would or not. If you were not my confessor I think I would just say nothing about it. And yet it fills all my horizon. I can see nothing round or beyond it, and think of nothing else.

And the worst is I can't settle what I feel about it. Am I angry, or sorry, or offended, or disappointed? I think I am frightened, with a vague sense of crisis, of everything being changed, and taken out of my own hands. And all this time I have not told you what it is. I will try and write you the story of the visit to the Quarries, as though nothing had happened, and let this thing come in, in its own place, among the other incidents of the day; and then you will see how easily I could have sent you this letter, and left it out altogether. I told you I was in high spirits, that nature and I were both in a good humour, and everything smiling. And I fancied Robert (I call him Mr. Henshaw to his face, I beg you to believe) was feeling cheerful too. It was ridiculous to enjoy the mere animal

sensation of rolling along in a decent form of carriage, so much. The road was a different thing to what it had been in that torturing waggonette. I liked to feel the stirring of the air on my face, to be dimly conscious of the objects whirling past us, to watch my companion's big strong hands in their dogskin covering, and the way he held the reins and whip. We talked hardly at all, but the little we said was silly, and we laughed at it a good deal.

We crossed a little tramway, not far from here, and I asked if it was the way their slate came down from the Quarries.

"No," he said, "that is not our tramway; that comes from the disused quarry of your predecessor of Tanfrws, poor old Denbigh; it is not used now." And, indeed, I could see great trails of blackberry vine stretching across it, and big

tufts of ragwort and hemp agrimony growing rankly between the rails. The thought of the Denbigh tragedy crossed the brightness of the day with a chilly shadow, like the first cloud across the sun.

Presently we passed the Plâs, where there were evident signs of preparation for the return of the owners, and so on to the upper end of the valley, where the road grows steep and the hills draw together, further than I had been at all on my former journey. The trees disappear in these higher regions; great rocks lie tossed about on the grass, and in the bed of the stream; the river Gaeslau, which flows so smoothly in the lower pastures, here twists, and tumbles, and foams among or over the stones. All around is a perpetual sound of falling

water. Little lithe Welsh sheep peer at one for a moment with curiously unsheep-like faces, and then spring away among the rocks, agile as chamois. Gradually the slate begins to appear, heaps of *débris* and broken shale lying all about; the walls, the bridges, the stepping-stones, the very hills themselves seem all to be of slate; the water comes oozing through piles of splintered slate refuse.

When I began to write I did not feel as if I could recall the sensations of the early part of the day at all, or give you any description of the queer new sights I have been seeing, but once I have begun, the old habit of talking to you on paper re-asserts itself, the pictures form in my mind again, and I had half forgotten what had blotted them all out, the catastrophe, at which perhaps you will

laugh when it comes, after all this introduction.

We presently reached the point where we had to leave the dogcart. There was a steep ascent to climb in the blazing sunshine. Mr. Henshaw insisted on bringing my jacket for me.

"You will be glad of it by and by," he said ; and indeed I was. But I observed he took nothing for himself.

At the top of the hill is a tiny house, built all of slate, or, at least, looking as though it were, in which the quarry manager lives. We found him in his office. A grey, silent, thoughtful man, with large dark eyes set in deep hollows. I thought he looked at me rather suspiciously.

"I have brought a friend, Hughes," Mr. Henshaw was explaining. "This

lady, Mrs. Crofts, would like to see our quarry, and I am sure you will be glad to show her everything."

Mr. Hughes said something, as much as was necessary, but no more, and after he and Mr. Henshaw had talked a little business, he led the way to the edge of what looked like an enormous pit, from which we could see all the working of the Quarries that was on the surface, the men looking like ants on some gigantic ant-hill, as they swarmed about the face of the rock opposite, having just the air of business combined with apparent purposelessness that you see in those insects. Mr. Hughes explained it all, and Mr. Henshaw threw in the picturesque touches; it conveyed very little to my mind. Low down in the wall of rock on the other side of this chasm was a little black hole, which I

found, somewhat to my dismay, was a tunnel leading to the subterranean workings, and the entrance by which we were to penetrate to them. We descended into the bowels of the earth by means of a sort of platform, with not so much as a hand-rail round it, which slid downwards and outwards with vertiginous rapidity, and upon which we stood like china figures on a bracket. I clung to Mr. Henshaw's arm and closed my eyes tightly, till he said: "There, Mrs. Crofts, the perilous descent is past;" and I stepped hastily off into a puddle of water. The air in these underground passages is cold and damp, and I was grateful for my jacket, in the abrupt transition from the sun-warmed atmosphere we had left outside. They led me through a maze of little dark subways, where one could just stand upright,

and not always that, emerging now and then into some great cavern with gloomy recesses stretching back into blackness, where human beings were leading the life of moles. Through all ran the rails of a little tramway, and I had to be careful to walk in the middle, because at the sides the water had collected often in quite deep pools. Every now and then Mr. Hughes went forward a little and listened, and called out unintelligible questions in Welsh, which were answered or not, as it happened, by a sort of far-off echo. He explained to me that a truck might be coming along, in which case we must not be on the line, where there was no room to get out of the way, but in one of the many recesses cut at intervals in the rock for this purpose, or we should be run over. This lent a pleasing sense of in-

security to the whole proceeding which I could have done without. At one point, after being away longer than usual, he returned and whispered something to Mr. Henshaw, who told me there was going to be a blasting, and asked if I should like to hear it. "It sounds rather fine down here, in these underground places," he said. I would have given five pounds to be out of the whole thing, but didn't like to say so. "If you stand back here in this little recess, you will be perfectly safe," he said. "None of the fragments can touch you. Stand on this flat stone; it is out of the wet."

I stood on the stone and held my breath.

"Will it be very loud?" I asked, with an elaborate affectation of indifference.

"Oh, no!" he said, in a tone which carried disbelief with it.

Presently there was a faint whistle.

"That's to warn the men to get under cover," Mr. Henshaw explained. "Will you believe it, though they know there is a very fair chance of their being killed if they don't, they are too lazy or indifferent, half the time, to take such a simple precaution. We have to fine them for not preserving their own lives. That whistle is two minutes before the blast, which gives them plenty of time to get out of the way."

Two minutes! two eternities! and I, who had been expecting the explosion every second, I could hear my heart thumping. It was awful, waiting in the silence and darkness. Suddenly it came, like a cannon going off; it was not so loud as I had feared, nor sharp, but somehow I seemed to have waited so long

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that it was as unexpected as though I had not waited at all, like the deaths of very old people. I gave a little involuntary scream, and stepped back, forgetting that I was on a stone, lost my balance, and should have fallen if Mr. Henshaw had not caught me. And now we come to what I am half unwilling to tell you. For one second I was conscious that he clasped me more tightly than was necessary to save me from falling, and at the same time I felt his lips just touch my cheek. The next, while the echoes of the explosion were still rumbling away through the narrow passages, and before Mr. Hughes had rejoined us from a neighbouring niche, I was once more firmly planted on my stone and he was standing in front of me in the water, holding out his hand to help me back

on to the tramway. It was all over so quickly, that I almost felt as if my senses had played me a trick. And yet, as I told you, it has been the one thing that has occupied me ever since. Even the upward flight on that awful platform did not frighten me, and I have only a blurred recollection of visiting the workshop, where the slate was being split, "dressed," I think they called it, and of a long and careful explanation of the distinctions between duchesses, countesses, and other members of the aristocracy, from whom the different kinds of slates take their names. All through the drive back, Mr. Henshaw's manner was perfect, courteous, and rather deferential, a little subdued I fancied. It seemed absurd to make a fuss, more dignified to ignore the whole thing utterly. I had got to drive

home with him, and I could not make an absurd scene like a huffy hoyden of a girl, who has let a man go too far, and is bristling with maidenly indignation. What could I do, except behave as if nothing had happened? And yet I did not find the idea a pleasant one, that Robert Henshaw should think I was the sort of woman that any man might kiss if he happened to find himself alone in the dark with her. But somehow I did not feel that was in the least what he did think. I shall see much less of him any way now his aunt and cousins are returning. There is no need for me to do anything at all about it. I wish I had not even told you. And yet writing it all down has been a relief.

There is the bald fact. Make what you like of it, and let me have the benefit of your wisdom, my dear friend.

LETTER XXXIII

August 17th.

You are very angry with Mr. Henshaw; much more so than I am, I'm afraid. I feel sure he did not mean to do it. I can't tell why, but I do. It was a sudden impulse, a temptation of the moment, and I hope it isn't very licentious of me, but I don't feel any resentment at it. You think, I can see, that he would not have done it to any one else, that he was taking advantage of my position. (I don't mean my actual physical position at the moment, but my social status.) But I honestly don't think that such was the case. I think it might just as well have happened to the Dutchest of the duchesses after whom his slates are called. I am in a hopelessly flippant mood to-day, you see,

and can only take a humorous view of the whole transaction. I shall have no difficulty in acting on your advice in one respect: that is to see less of him in future; he is making that quite easy for me. I have not set eyes on him since the memorable expedition; and of course he is certain to come less often now that his relations are back at the Plás. And I assure you, there is no need to be apprehensive for my peace of mind. No, no, my dear. A burnt child is a proverbial nuisance. I have had enough of men from that point of view. My experience of love has not been a happy one; to use a homely simile, it hurt, but I think, mercifully, it killed the nerve. I was determined to be proud and take the thing courageously; not to myself, not even to you, would I admit that

I felt it; but no woman can be laid on one side like an old boot and not suffer cruelly in pride and temper, even if not in heart. I shall not easily be led into thinking I care for any man again.

The poor little spurt of beautiful weather has quite come to an end, and a sort of premature autumn has set in, gusty and rainy. I don't know a more pathetic sight than a Welsh cornfield. These attempts to wrest a handful of food from an unfruitful soil fill me with pity; even in an exceptionally fine summer, they must always have a painfully scraggy look, poor little patches of cultivation hanging in such unlikely fashion to the hillside, often with a great rock cropping out in the middle of them, and looking like a stone laid on them to prevent their blowing away. And now with their

wretched stalks all beaten down while they are still green, they are heartrending to behold.

LETTER XXXIV

August 29th.

You complain that I don't write to you, Milly, dear. The fact is that all the shyness and awkwardness which I ought to feel towards Robert Henshaw, and don't, I feel towards you, because I know you think meanly of me for my too ready forgiveness. I have seen him several times ; once I met him, and twice he has been to see me. His visits have become painfully like what they were at first, before poor Tib's accident. It has been on the tip of my tongue several times to say : "What is the matter? If you forgot yourself once for a moment, is that to

spoil all our intercourse? If I don't care, why in the world should you?" But I suppose it would be unwomanly. I fancy from one or two things he let drop that he is not having a very peaceful time with his family. I seem born to make trouble in that quarter. And to make everything worse, Norris is coming home again.

I have got Shelley's lovely lines in my head to-day—

"Oh, Mary dear, that you were here,
With your brown eyes, soft and clear."

Sometimes I get almost a sick longing to see your dear face and hear your voice, even if you were scolding me. Everything seems dreary to me. I think I will come, in a cloak and veil, like the mysterious lady in plays, and walk in on you through the open window, just when you have given the cue, by saying: "It is

strange ; there seems an unwonted chill in the air to-day ; I must close the window." Then you would rise to do it, and find a muffled figure standing there, which would throw off its draperies, and say, with a sob, "Don't you know me?" In real life, when one wants to see a person ever so much, one can't put on a cloak and walk in at the drawing-room window. There are a thousand intangible obstacles, as impassable as fortifications. Not being able to walk to you, I have walked in another direction. Perhaps it is because I have had such a long walk, and am tired this evening, that I am in this pathetic vein ; my vitality is low. I thought I would follow the little tramline I passed with Mr. Henshaw the other day, up to the old quarry which was the ruin of the poor Denbighs. It was much further than

I expected. I can't pretend to tell you how far it was by miles; measurements never convey any idea of distance to my mind, any more than minutes and hours do of time. I know I wandered on and on, up a little dell, which cut into the heart of the upland behind the house, and so out at last on to the lower slopes of the mountain. Suddenly the lines I had been following seemed to rise perpendicularly in front of me, up a mound of broken rock and slate, to a platform almost over my head. Through, and round, and under this heap, came oozing and dripping, the stream, which, no doubt hundreds of years ago, had made this little channel in the side of the hill, by which to go down to the valley of the Gaeslau. I scrambled up with some difficulty, caught at by blackberry vines, like restraining hands, to

what had been the entrance of the deserted quarry. How can I describe to you the scene of desolation that it presented? Mr. Henshaw had explained to me that the cause of the failure had been, not the giving out of the slate, but that the vein had dived so deeply into the earth, that the cost of getting it out must always exceed any price it could fetch in the market. The result of this was that the workings had been abandoned quite suddenly, giving an impression of being stopped by the wand of some malicious fairy. The sheds were fast becoming ruinous, the machinery was there, but broken and rusted. Life and work had ebbed away, and the whole place had run down and stopped, like the inside of some gigantic clock. The last truck-load of slates, even, stood there all ready packed,

and waiting the impulse it would never receive, to start on its journey down to the river, the sea, the world. Little ferns and wild plants had rooted themselves in between the slates, and were flourishing quite contentedly in this unnatural flower-bed. I went forward to the edge of the pit and looked over. The stream, forcing its way in by disregarded fissures, and added to by the rains of all these winters, had made a black pool in the bottom of the excavation. How deep the water might be it was impossible to guess, but seen so far below me, and with its inky surface so untroubled and so unlighted, it gave an impression of fathomless and sinister depth that I can never forget. "What a scene," I thought, "for a murder or a suicide! Into those awful shadows any burthen of sorrow or crime might go

down, and the pit would tell no tales." I sat there till the gloom of the place froze its way into my heart, and the effect is not worn off yet. Forgive this depressing letter. I ought not to have written to-night at all.

LETTER XXXV

September 3rd.

What a fallacy it is to suppose that time goes fast when one is amused, and slow when nothing happens ; it is when life is absolutely monotonous, as mine is, that time flies. There is nothing to mark his course. Here I am in September already. I can't believe that it was April when I came here. Surely no summer ever slid away so quickly. I only took the house till October ; six months ! It was an age to look forward to ; and the burthen of

deciding what was to become of me next seemed indefinitely postponed. And already I am nearly at the end of the time, and am no nearer a decision as to my future life than when I came here. To tell the truth, I haven't tried much to decide ; it was pleasant to rest, to lie fallow, to drift ; only I ought to have drifted in some direction, whereas I have been turning round on myself like a dead leaf in a backwater.

I don't wonder my last letter frightened you ; it was the dark scene in the pantomime with a vengeance ; the bassoons were rumbling in every line of it, varied at intervals by the shuddering shrieks of the violins. I felt the conclusion a little tame, and was quite ashamed to say I got up and walked home again. Didn't you think I was going at least to see poor Mr.

Denbigh's ghost? The *mise en scène* was so good; and then nothing happened. Alas! life is essentially undramatic; the crisis of one's fate comes on one, sitting *tout bêtement* in one's armchair, not even suitably dressed. The crisis of my fate hasn't come to *me*, in a chair or out of it. Only a visit from Mr. Henshaw, who was very kind, very polite, a little constrained, and consequently rather dull.

I asked if Norris had come back.

"Yes," he said, "he came yesterday. Should you like to see him?"

"I am not sure," I answered; "I should have liked it of all things, if I felt certain it wouldn't make trouble for him with his people."

"I don't think there would be any opposition to his coming now, if he wishes it."

"Mr. Henshaw," I asked suddenly, moved by I don't know what impulse, "now that you know me better, and know more about me, can't you imagine that I felt your anxiety about your cousin a little absurd?"

"Don't talk about that, Mrs. Crofts; it was all too grotesque to think of. And yet, what could we do? That you could have no designs beyond those which were dictated by simple kindness, I see now clearly enough. But I can't help feeling you might be very dangerous in spite of yourself."

"Oh! Mr. Henshaw," I said, "you are not going to do anything so unworthy of you, as to pay me compliments."

"I'm not paying compliments, Mrs. Crofts," he answered. "It's deadly earnest. You are more dangerous than you know."

What did he mean by that? He can't be implying that I endanger *his* peace of mind. And yet, once or twice lately, there has been something in his face, or manner, that has made me vaguely uncomfortable. Did I tell you in one of my letters that I wished he would fall in love with me? I don't. Since I know and like him so much better, I am incapable of wishing to make him unhappy, and when I think of the bare possibility of such a thing actually happening, I realise that it is the very last thing I should wish.

LETTER XXXVI

September 14th.

Norris has been to see me, looking more lovely and cherubic than ever. Not much improved in other ways, I thought. I suspect he has been frequenting silly

girls in country-houses, and caught the giggles from them. He tells me he is learning the banjo, and suggested bringing it, to play duets with my guitar, but I did not jump at it.

If he was ever inclined to like me too much, I think the fancy has quite passed ; however he was cordial and seem'd glad to see me again. He did not allude to his mother and sisters, and I preserved a like discretion. About his cousin he was less reticent.

"What have you done to Robert, Mrs. Crofts?" he asked. "By George, he's quite come round about you. I think you've made a conquest of him."

"Don't talk nonsense," I said severely, "Mr. Henshaw has been very kind to me in many ways."

"Didn't you begin by having rather a

row about me, or something?" he persisted.

I felt myself flushing hotly.

"Suppose there ever was any unpleasantness between your cousin and me," I said, "do you think it is kind to go raking it up? Whatever we once were, we are very good friends now."

"Ah!" said the boy grinning, "So I see. That old Robert's a deep un; I believe the reason he didn't like me fooling round here, was that he was jealous; he wanted the field to himself."

I don't like that sort of facetiousness, and told him so. There is one comfort in a boy of that age; you can call him a fool ever so roundly, and he thinks it funny. How could Robert Henshaw have supposed I could care for a child like that? But I forgot; that's not what he thought;

the danger was that I should spread my toils for *him*; not that I should fall a victim to his *beaux yeux*, and they are *beaux*. I had forgotten how handsome the boy was. I hope he won't go to the bad; good-looking people are so apt to. I can't see the causal connection in a man's case. Of course beauty is a snare to a woman, because she has only one way of going to the devil, and if she is pretty, it opens the road; but why should a handsome youth be extravagant, or bet, or gamble more than a plain one? And yet they always seem more inclined to make asses of themselves. I must say Norris seems a healthy simple lad enough, if he were only not quite so silly. If he talks in that way to his cousin, he may just make trouble; perhaps make him angry with *me*, which is hard.

LETTER XXXVII

September 20th.

The colouring is getting superb here. The bracken has become a noble russet, and the heather is not out of bloom yet. Many of the trees are turning very finely ; I am not sure the autumn in this place is not going to prove more beautiful even than the spring. I have written to the house-agent, and find there will be no difficulty about my keeping the house on, by the week, for another month or so, in fact, practically for as long as I like. No one wants it, and Mrs. Denbigh is thankful to have it warmed and lived in. Mr. Henshaw has not been to see me again, since Norris came back ; I *do* hope the boy has not been trying any of his graceful chaff on his cousin ; it would be

too vulgar. Robert is just the kind of man who would hate it.

LETTER XXXVIII

September 24th.

There is company at the Plás. Mr. Mutter, who would have made a first-rate head of the secret police, and knows the last half-pound of butter in his enemies' stronghold, told me yesterday that they were expecting people for a shooting party. So I shall not see much of either cousin for the present. I am sorry for them, if they are trying to shoot to-day; the rain is coming down in a solid curtain of wet all round the house, which makes me feel as if I had taken lodgings under Niagara. Mutter cheerfully remarks that it's the "autumn rains settin' in," and adds, "Dreadful bad weather for them as

is rheumatically. If you stayed here long, you'd be as bent and as twisted as I am."

I ventured to assert that some of the people who were exposed to this climate seemed fairly straight.

"Where do you see 'em?" he asked.

"Well," I said, "take the Henshaw family; where would you find finer specimens than they are?"

"You seem wonderful took up with them Henshaws," he retorted resentfully. "Well, *take* the Henshaws; they live in a fine stone house on the side of a hill; the water drains off there."

"If it comes to that," I persisted, determined not to be beaten, "this house is stone too, and painted into the bargain; and though it doesn't stand as high as the Plâs, it is on the side of the hill as well."

"Ah! you may think so," he replied

gloomily, "take care you're not disappointed," with which dark saying he vanished. I have known him long enough now to realise that he takes refuge in these Sibylline warnings when pressed into a corner by argument, a thing which, I fancy, no one but me has ever ventured to do with him.

LETTER XXXIX

September 26th.

I have had an encounter which has upset me a little. It never entered my head when I heard of a shooting party at the Plâs, that one of the guests would prove to be an acquaintance of mine. It rained a great part of yesterday, but to-day was so enchantingly lovely, that I thought I would go up and see the sunset from the hill at the back of the house. I

don't often go up there, since Tib's accident; there are such pitfalls for him; but he has become much more prudent since that terrible experience—indeed he is inclined to want assistance over the most trifling obstacles. I clambered up, without mischance, to a seat among rocks and heather, from which I looked over a wide landscape to the sea. The ugly little town of Abergaelau was only a glorified haze of smoke, and a tangle of masts and rigging, in the bosom of the golden west. My own valley was shut out from me by the wood through which I had come; there was a pleasant feeling of new surroundings and a new life in even looking westward.

Suddenly I heard voices, and a party of men turned the shoulder of a little knoll, which had hidden their approach, and crossed the grass flat in front of

where I was sitting. A fat, foolish, choleric sort of man was trotting along in front, puffy and consequential, on whom county magnate was written large all over. Robert Henshaw was attending him with his beautiful grave dignity. Then came two other sportsmen whom I did not know, and lastly Norris, with yet two other men. The Henshaws raised their caps to me as they passed, but, to my great surprise, one of Norris's companions gave a little exclamation on catching sight of me, and leaving his friends, came towards me with outstretched hand. It was Jack Hilyard, whom I must have mentioned to you in some of my letters. He was Lord Medmenham's most intimate friend, and I used to see a great deal of him in old days in Ebury Street.

“Who in the world would have thought

of finding you here," he cried, "of all unlikely places?"

The others half halted, but he called to them that he would overtake them directly. I saw Robert start and turn round, but he could not leave his guest, who was holding forth to him, and the next moment he turned a corner and was out of sight. The glow was dying out of the west, and I felt as though my past had risen suddenly and confronted me, just when my face had been turned to newer things. I had liked Jack in old days, he had always been kind and civil to me, and he naturally took it for granted I should be pleased to see him again. But a "death's-head with a bone in its mouth," as Portia says, would hardly have been a less pleasing object to me at the moment. And yet I can't tell exactly

why I felt such a cold clutch about my heart at the sight of this amiable, handsome young man who had always been my friend.

"There have been many guesses as to what had become of you," he went on, "but I'm bound to say none of us ever hit on Cwm-y-straeth as a likely place to find you in."

"You see the world is very small," I said, smiling weakly. "I hardly know how I came here myself; I certainly never expected to meet you here, and yet when you think of it, what was more likely than that you should know the Henshaws, and come down to stay with them?"

"Do you know the Henshaws?" he asked with some embarrassment; he was evidently trying to think of how to say

what he wanted to, in a way that should not be offensive. "Of course you know," he added with a little cough, "that you may rely on my absolute discretion, and all that, don't you know."

"Thank you, Jack," I answered wearily. "You need not trouble to exercise it on my account. I don't know the female Henshaws, and I almost wish I didn't know the men; I am not here on false pretences; the family have all the information they have any right to, about me."

We had walked on, back into the wood together, as we talked.

"Well, I'm awfully glad to have had this glimpse of you. I must be getting on now; is there anything I can do for you? Any message to any one, or anything?"

"No, thanks," I said, "nothing."

"Where are you stopping?" he asked.

"I live in that little white house down there that you can see through the trees; your way to the Plás is straight along this path you are on; perhaps you can come and see me to-morrow."

"I wish I could," he said heartily, "but I'm due at the Gwynn Jones's to-morrow. I ought to have gone to-day, but young Henshaw asked me to stay on, as the weather has been so bad. I wish I'd known you were in the neighbourhood. Well, I'm ever so glad to have seen you, Sibyl; the country seems to suit you; you look blooming. May I tell old George you're well and happy and all that? I know he worries about you a bit."

"Oh, yes, if you like," I said. "How is George—Lord Medmenham, I mean? Do you see much of him, now he's married?"

"Oh, yes, I see him now and then; he's awfully good to me. I don't think Lady M. cares much about me though. Well, I must run. Good-bye."

"Good-bye. Oh! by the way, I told you your hosts know all about me they need. If you don't mind I wouldn't say anything to them about *Lord Medmenham*. The fewer people know about it the better for *him*; don't you know, *now*."

He promised, wrung my hand, and departed.

He's a good soul, Jack. I wonder why I was so far from glad to see him again?

LETTER XL

September 28th

He has been to see me. I guessed he would after the Jack Hilyard episode. (By "he" I mean Robert Henshaw.) I

knew quite well that he had come for an explanation, and yet didn't quite like to ask for it. After he had talked a little of this and that, I took pity on him and gave him an opening.

"You weren't very fortunate in your weather for the shooting party, were you?" I said.

"No; we had to put off our shoot nearly two days; it broke up the whole thing. By the way, it seems one of the men at the Plás was an old friend of yours."

"Yes; Mr. Hilyard and I have known each other for some time."

"I suppose," he said, tentatively, "you were very glad to see him again."

"No," I answered; "if I am to tell you the truth, I wasn't particularly glad to see him, although he is a very good

s

fellow, and I used to like him very much."

I fancied his brow cleared a little at my reply, and he asked, almost eagerly, "Why?"

"Well, I hardly know; I felt it was unkind of me. I suppose the fact is, that he is very much connected with a period of my life of which I don't care to be reminded, and which, in these different surroundings I have almost succeeded in forgetting."

"Sibyl," he said, eagerly leaning forward, and looking earnestly into my face, "was he (I know I've no sort of right to ask), but was he——"

"No," I said. "No; certainly not. He was a friend of—of a friend of mine, that's all."

There was an awkward pause, and then

he made some attempt at apology or explanation.

"Oh! never mind," I said, hastily. "Of course you had no business to ask, and I ought not to have answered; it was a want of all proper pride in me, but it's done, and you can't explain it away."

I wish you could have seen the look of real sorrow on his face.

"No; I've no right," he cried, almost passionately; "no sort of business with anything that concerns you; and yet you don't know all it means to me. Is it possible you don't see, don't understand——"

"Stop, Mr. Henshaw," I said, hastily. "I don't know what you were going to say, but I feel for both our sakes it is better you should not say it. You are

letting yourself be hurried into something that you—that we shall both regret.”

He looked at me with unmistakable admiration, and, I thought, with just a touch of surprise.

“Sibyl, Mrs. Crofts,” he said, in his low, beautiful voice, “you are a constant revelation to me. The more I see of you, the more I admire and wonder at you.”

I laughed uneasily.

“You are very flattering,” I said.

We talked a little longer of one thing and another, and then he took his leave. Oh, Milly! what does it all mean? Can it be what you predicted, what I once half hoped, what I would now give the world to avert? Can he be falling in love with me?

LETTER XLI

October 2nd.

Oh! I hope not, I hope not. You say "there is no doubt about it; no question of *falling* in love, the man *is* in love with you. It is just what any one not a baby could have foreseen all along; the only thing left to pray for, is that you may not return it." Dear Mlily, you will think it humbug, if I say that seems to matter so little by comparison. It is not of myself I am thinking. But if he really has got to care for me, enough to be made unhappy by the struggle, it is luckily not too late; nothing has been said. I am gladder than ever that I stopped him the other day. I can go away. I think that will be best. He will soon forget that he has ever seen me. Why should

I come into the life of this good man and disturb his peace? As soon as I can find some other place to go to, and can make arrangements for leaving here, it will not seem abrupt. I only took the house till this month; it is the natural end of the whole thing. I still hope that you are wrong; but in any case I had better go. Yes, that will be best—much, much best.

LETTER XLII

October 5th.

What an angel you are, and what a beautiful plan! To go away with you, and have you all to myself for a whole fortnight, there is rest and refreshment in the mere thought. It is so like you to pretend that for some time you have wished the baby to have sea-air, so that I

may not feel you are leaving your home and your other children entirely on my account. Well, I accept the sacrifice and with real gratitude. A little sleepy seaside place, such as you describe Scantleborough to be, with its season over, and only a few nursemaids sunning themselves and their charges on a southern cliff, sounds enchanting. Or, if it rains, we will shut ourselves up in the lodging, and work and talk all day ; to be sure the baby will not get much sea-air under those circumstances, but I feel he has so many more good things in this world than I have, and above all so much more abundant a share of you, that I don't even care about that, especially as I strongly suspect his need of sea-air to be a pious fraud.

LETTER XLIII

October 6th.

Oh! Milly, you were right. It is more necessary even than I knew, that I should go away, and, if possible, avoid any leave-taking. Robert Henshaw is going away for some time—a visit, business, I don't know what. Anyway he will be gone before I return from Scantleborough, and then I shall have plenty of time to pack up, and make my final arrangements. I did not tell him I was going, but I shall slip off quite quietly to-morrow morning, without beat of drum, and go and wait there, for you, till you come. I can write from there, and wish him good-bye. It is best, far best, that we should not meet again. He has told me that he loves me.

The look in his eyes will haunt me all my life. I was singing the song you like, that charming setting of the words from "Maud": "Oh! let the solid ground." As I finished, some instinct made me look round from the piano, and there in the doorway he stood, looking so unlike the calm dignified man I thought him. His face was very pale, and he looked almost dazed; he stretched out his hands towards me from where he stood, and kept repeating the last words of the song, almost as though he were talking in his sleep: "Then let come what come may; what matter if I go mad, I shall have had my day." And then, with almost a sob, "Sibyl, Sibyl, I love you, I want to have my day too. I never, never have had. My life has been one long self-repression, one dreary sacrifice to duty. I am not old,

I am young, quite young, and aching for a little happiness."

I can't tell you all he said ; I couldn't repeat it, and I don't feel as if I ought, even to you. But that first sentence has burnt itself into my brain ; the expression, "aching for a little happiness," struck me so. But it would *not* be happiness for him. I keep telling myself that, as I told it to him, as soon as I found my voice. To so proud a man, life with me could only bring a long series of mortifications. Oh ! I am bitterly punished for my thoughtless words, that I almost wished he would fall in love with me. How little they represented to me, as I wrote them, how terrible the realisation of them would prove ! It is frightening to see a strong, self-contained man like that, shaken out of all self-control, and to know one has been

the cause. I have one comfort; I have not tried to bring this about in any way. I am not responsible; I never stirred a finger to attract him. But oh! I feel as guilty as if it were all my fault. Well, there is only one reparation I can make. He must never see me again. I shall go by the first train to-morrow morning; and then, when he is safely out of the way, I will come back here and wind up, and when he returns for Christmas he will find nothing to remind him that he ever heard of such a person as your loving friend,

SIBYL CROFTS.

LETTER XLIV

Tanfrws, October 25th.

Here I am safe back, and the fortnight with you is already a thing of the past.

How can I ever thank you for all you have been to me? In the very middle of the bitterest trial of my life, it has given me a little slice of the purest and most unalloyed happiness I have ever known. You are the only friend I have, loved as no one with the ordinary ties of life can realise, and yet all my intercourse with you has to be through the cold medium of pens and paper. I fully see that it must be so. But, such being the case, can you not understand, a little, what you have done for me? This daily, hourly talk and companionship of the sweetest woman in the world, has been what a sight of flowers, and fields, and blue sky, with scents and noises of the country, might be to a man kept long in prison. To be able to say all I wanted, just for opening my mouth, with your kind eyes looking into

mine, instead of putting it all down on paper ; to receive your sympathy straight from your loving lips, instead of having to break open an envelope to get at it—at any time it would have been much to me ; just now it has been everything. I think it has saved me from madness. I am writing incoherently, hysterically, quite unlike myself. I know you won't like it, but I must try to find words for all the gratitude I am feeling, or I shall burst. I am thankful, too, to you for drawing my wretched secret out of me, with delicate, wise touches. I had meant never to tell it to any human being, not even you.

Perhaps I did not fully realise it myself ; perhaps, after all my self-confidence and bravado, I was ashamed to confess how miserably wrong I had been, how utterly the event had justified your warn-

ings of what I had treated as the merest impossibility. I don't think I could ever have found the courage to write it. But there, face to face with you, in our long sunny rambles on the cliff, in quiet evenings by the fire with my head on your shoulder, and your kind hand stroking my hair, it was so easy to confess, almost without any words. A silence after one of your questions, a little pressure of your hand, could tell you all you wanted to know. I think, if we lived together, we might get to talk entirely without words, by degrees ; we understand each other so quickly. Any way it is a comfort that you know that I have now no shadow of a secret from you. You can look straight into my heart and see the poor aching hopeless love that has made its home there, just as I see it myself. Of course I

love him. Now that I shall never see him again, that by my own act I have cut myself off from him for ever, it is a relief to write the words, as I should like to go up the hill, and cry them to the four winds of heaven. How could I meet the best, the noblest, the strongest, the kindest man I have ever seen, and not love him? I feel it is a patent of nobility to me, that my soul has recognised his worth so absolutely. I know now that I have never loved before; don't laugh. Of course people always say that. But in my case it has a deeper, more real meaning.

Good women, like you, give their little virgin hearts to some man, and all is said. They know they love him, and that's all; they have no past, no standard to measure their love by. But my love is more like a man's. I can compare, and tell the differ-

ence. I understand now the reverence, the awe, the almost worship, with which a man who has led the ordinary life of young men, approaches the woman who, he feels, will henceforth be the real queen of his life. If it had so chanced that I could have met Robert Henshaw before I ever went on the stage, or saw George Medmenham, and such an unlikely thing could have happened as that he should have noticed the insignificant stupid girl I was then, I should have returned his love indeed, but I should never have understood my feelings for him so completely as I do, when I look at them in the light of the last five or six years. It is something to know that he loves me. Till I had done what I felt I must, and made our separation irrevocable, I would not own even to myself that I had any feeling but

dismay at the discovery ; but now I may safely hug the thought, and get what comfort I can out of it. I shall always respect myself, when I reflect that the very best man I ever met, knowing all there was to know about me, and, in that knowledge, struggling hard against his heart, yet could not help loving me ; and that if I had wished—*wished*—Oh ! good God ! what a word ! I must not write any more like this, or I shall weaken myself ; and Heaven knows the call on my strength is not over yet. I look round on all the things here, and am loath to begin breaking up. I cannot bring myself to pack. Painful as some of its associations are, this little house has been more like a home to me than anything I have known since the old days, before my father died. And the great central event of my life has come to

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me here. It will be terribly hard pulling up stakes, and setting out again. Shall I always be "moving on," like a wretched little street Arab with a relentless policeman behind me? Is it true that there is "no peace for the wicked"? I go round the place, and everything is associated with him. Down at the gate I saw him first, as he rode by; in that chair he sat when he came on his diplomatic mission to save Norris from my clutches. In the stable he first took my hand, and looked kindly and pityingly at me. In the little dining-room he broke bread with me. In the verandah, and on the terrace before it, we have sat and talked of many things. In the doorway of this room he stood with outstretched hands, and told me that he loved me.

I mustn't think of it. I shall never

have courage if I do. I shall think of you instead, of you, and of you only, and so strive to be brave, and worthy of your priceless friendship.

LETTER XLV

October 26th.

He is not gone after all. I am still quite trembling with the discovery. I went out to moon about, this afternoon, and think over all that has happened since I came here; and on a sudden, when I was thinking him miles away, and that I should never see him again, he was standing before me. It was such a shock as almost to deprive me of the power of thought. It was like seeing some one whom one had mourned as dead; for I had taught myself to look on our separation as not less irrevocable. "I

thought you had gone," was all I could say.

"Did you really think I should go quite quietly away," he said, "without making an effort to see you; that your poor little letter from Scantleborough was to be the last communication to pass between us? You can't have thought my love for you was very strong."

"I don't know, I thought you had gone; I never thought of your not going," were still the only words I could find.

"Well, I'm not, you see. May I walk home with you?"

"No," I cried. "No; I must have time." My head was in a whirl, and I almost ran from him.

"Then I shall come and see you to-morrow," he called after me, but I did not answer. I felt I must get away and be

alone and think. It is so stupid of me ; it was so terribly simple and likely that he should stay here till I came back, if he really cared for me ; and yet it never for one moment occurred to me as a possibility. I can't write to-night. My head aches, and I am too excited. I had thought everything was settled, and now it is all to do over again. I will finish this in the morning.

October 27th.

One often talks airily of "not having slept a wink all night." Any one who has really known what it is to be awake all night, will never lightly use the phrase again. After I left off writing to you yesterday evening I fell sound asleep in my chair, from sheer physical exhaustion, and slept for hours. When finally I awoke, and crept stiff and chilly to bed, I grew

hour by hour more wakeful, and literally slept no more till morning. The night seemed twenty-four hours long, and yet it was too short for all I had to think of and decide upon. "I must think clearly," I kept repeating to myself. "I want all my faculties, all my judgment. To-morrow the great decision of my life has to be made. Let me think, think, think." And the more I tried to set my wretched ideas in order, to consider what I had to do, the more feeble my brain seemed to become, the more incapable of seizing any image clearly, except a terrible overshadowing sense of something coming upon me which I was wholly unprepared to meet. But towards morning, and especially after the dawn began, one idea kept gradually emerging from the chaos, and taking shape and strength

with the growing light. It was only a half defiant-reaction at first, a sense of rebellion against the burthen I had voluntarily assumed, but presently I found myself asking quite plainly, "Why am I bound to do this thing?" After all my storm-tossings, all my unhappiness, all my doubts of the future, here is a solution presented to me, far above anything I could have dreamed of. Why should I put it from me? I had never till then fairly considered the possibility of that side of the question. In all the talk we had together, Milly, why did it never occur to us as possible that I should do anything but give him up and leave him? Why should I consider him so exclusively? What forbids me to think of myself a little, and of my own welfare and happiness? I suppose it is the fear

of his relations, of what they will say and think, the terror of being supposed to be what they thought me at first, a designing adventuress, anxious to secure a position. What does it matter what *they* think, so long as *he* knows me better. Ah! but suppose he should ever have doubts of the purity of my motives. I have such strong inducements to marry him, as the world reckons, even if I did not love him, that there might be moments in which he wondered if that was all. No; surely he could not doubt me—and yet he might. I never could prove to him that I had married him only because I love the grass his feet have trodden better than all the rest of the world. There is only one thing can put my disinterestedness beyond a doubt; and that is to refuse. But am I bound to

buy a right to pride at such a cost? Who can make me sure that I am even doing the best for *him*? I know his life is a dull—often a sad one; it must be lonely. If he loves me as much as he says he does he will not, at his age, quickly learn to forget me, and love another woman in my place. Am I not, perhaps, shutting the door on his happiness as well as on my own? Oh! what is best to do? The temptation is so strong that it is impossible for me to judge coldly. I couldn't bear that he should ever have to blush for me, that shame or offence should come to him through me. And yet, and yet—it is not as if he lived in London, or moved in the great, wicked, pitiless, prying circle that people call Society. Here, in this secluded place, no one knows anything about me. He is so universally

beloved and respected, that, once his wife, people would accept me for his sake, even if they asked a few questions at first as to who I was. We should live it down. As to his family, I would cringe to them, bear anything from them, till I wore out their hostility by sheer meekness. I would *make* them love me in the end. Why, if he has learned to love me without any effort on my part, can't I win them too, if I give my whole soul to the endeavour, and with him to help me? I know I should make him a good wife; I could be a companion to him, and sympathise with him intellectually as no woman in this part of the world could do. He never could be happy with some narrow-minded, little, innocent, priggish girl like his cousins. If he *could* have married any of the women in this

neighbourhood, would not he have done so long ago? No; I have made the sacrifice, have done my best, have tried to give him up, and it has all been of no use. We fret and worry ourselves as to what to do and what to decide, and after all we are in Fate's hands. If this supremest happiness is to be mine, why should I struggle so blindly to put it from me? I have made my attempt and it has been ineffectual. Now I will drift with the stream. I wonder what I shall have to tell you in my next letter.

LETTER XLVI

Chester, October 27th.

It is all over, Milly darling, and I have been such a blind besotted fool, that I can hardly bring myself to write, and tell even

you. My cheeks burn when I think of my own idiotcy. Even in this bitterest hour of my life, there is something grimly comic in the thought of how I tormented myself as to whether or no to be Robert Henshaw's wife ; but the grimness so far outweighs the comicality, that I am not laughing at all. What wouldn't I give to get back that silly fatuous letter I wrote you yesterday.

Yesterday ! Was it yesterday, or years ago ? I have grown an old woman in the interval. How could I have realised my position, and the view that the good people take of it, so pitifully little ? Mr. Henshaw came soon after I had finished writing to you. I can't tell you all we said, or how the truth gradually dawned upon me. I know he took me in his arms, and that I laid my head on his

shoulder with a sense of peace that I shall never, never know again. He told me again and again how he loved me (and the memory of his words is sweet to me even now), how he had struggled vainly against his passion for me, till at last it had swept him quite off his feet, how, little by little, his views on certain subjects had so changed since he knew me, that he had come to see how the commonplace views of morality which he had taken for sacred and eternal laws, were mere social conventions. I can't write it all down, nor tell you how it came to me that I had mistaken him utterly, and what he really wanted. When, at last, his meaning forced itself on me, I started back with a sudden cry. He took my hands and tried to draw me to him again. My voice sounded in my ears as though it came

from some one else, quite strange and unlike myself. "See," I said, "how six months in the country have restored my sense of modesty; your proposition quite startled me," and I laughed, a hard, discordant laugh, with no mirth in it.

Do you see, Milly? it had never once occurred to him as a possibility that he should marry me. What I had taken for the struggle of his love with his worldly prudence, was really between his growing passion and his principles, his virtue, his religion, whatever it was that taught him to regard an irregular connection with a woman as sinful. He had never for a moment dreamed of any other as possible after a past like mine. I had looked on him as an angel—a redeemer—and he had regarded me as something pleasant but wrong, a temptation of St. Anthony, to be

resisted if possible ; and, when resistance became irksome, to be yielded to, and enjoyed in secret. And the awful thing was that I saw all the pitiless logic of his point of view. And all the time, he kept telling me how much my arguments and my ideas had had to do with his changed way of looking at things. He stayed a long time, and said much more. As for me, I said almost nothing. What answers had I to bring against his reasoning. He was so intoxicated with his own sensations, so busy convincing himself there was no harm in what he desired, that I don't think he even noticed my silence. He went on explaining arrangements, as how we could continue to live as before, each in our respective houses, visiting each other by stealth ; no one need suspect our new relations ; there need be no

scandal. People had grown accustomed to his frequent visits to me. He had thought it all out. I never attempted to interrupt him ; I seemed to agree to it all. I even let him kiss me. Oh ! how bitter those kisses were, which should have been so sweet !

“ Why should we strive and cry, and fence ourselves with our little moralities ? ” he said. “ We are in Love’s hand, my darling ; he is supreme ; why should we struggle against his power ? ”

There was no thought of lifting me ; he would come down to me in the mud, and we would lie there contentedly together. That was evidently the view he took of it all.

I hope I may never again have to live through such hours as I passed after he left me, looking at the ruins of the idol I

had made for myself during so many weeks, lying shattered at my feet. I had refrained from all speech, for fear I should say something that might seem as though I were taking advantage of his passion, to try and make him marry me, should even let out to him that I had ever entertained such an idea. I had let him go away thinking that I agreed to what he wished. What was to be done? How should I undeceive him? Hour after hour passed, and still I could hit on no plan, think of nothing to say to him. I went into the dining-room and ate my dinner, when the time came, quite mechanically, scarcely knowing what I did. I felt as though I were performing accustomed acts in my sleep. He had whispered something at parting about eleven o'clock, and his words, hardly noticed at the time,

suddenly came back to me. I started up. "Something has got to be done before eleven o'clock to-night," I thought. Then it was that a sudden vision of the deserted quarry rose so alluringly before me. I could see every detail of the scene as it had appeared to me that afternoon. And I realised how it is that people come to kill themselves. I don't think it is great sorrow that tempts one to suicide so much as the hopelessness of finding any way out of a situation. There are times when to die and be done with everything strikes one as such a startlingly simple solution of the whole matter. I confess to you quite humbly and truthfully, that for half an hour or so, I was as near taking my own life as I suppose any one has ever been, without doing it. The thought of that great hole of blackness and silence

was almost more than I could resist. It seemed as though my steps had been led there that day, because I should have need of the place presently. I think what saved me was a sudden consciousness of the staginess and *banalité* of such an ending. I remembered the contemptuous pity with which I had heard of a chorus-girl at the theatre who had taken poison in some love complication. It was not the wickedness or even the weakness of the act that had struck me, but the commonplace literary view of the fitness of things, displayed by it. No ; you need not be afraid that I shall do that. I have had the temptation and it is past. The clock striking nine, and Virginie coming to ask if I wanted anything more before she went to bed, roused me to a sense of how time was

passing, and then my thoughts took a new turn.

After all, why should I do anything? Why not accept the situation, stay where I was, and let things take their course. Who was I, to give myself airs of virtue, to refuse to take this man for my lover, when he loved me, and I loved him with my whole heart? But even as I tried to think it, I felt it was impossible. It was not any new belief in the sacredness of marriage as such, but a sudden sense that for such love as I felt for Robert Henshaw only the highest form of union, whatever it was, would be endurable.

To be kept in a corner, the hidden sin of his life, would be a daily torture, and I recalled what he had said about the possibility of a woman taking one departure from the beaten track of commonplace

morality without much harm, but that after the first lover would come the second, and so on, step by step, till the degradation was complete. And yet all his love could do for me was to give me the first impulse on that downward path. I did not think all this out clearly and simply as I write it to you ; my mind was a seething mass of contradictions, of temptations, of stray tags of memory and feeling, out of which the conclusions shaped themselves by degrees and with infinite misery to me.

It was clear to me that if I met him, I was lost. I could not stop his coming ; there was only one way ; I must go before he arrived. I had little time left for preparations. I stuffed a few things and some money into a bag ; then I wrote a note for Virginie saying I was gone, and

would telegraph to her where to join me in the morning. I even wrote a line of farewell to Norris; but to Robert, though I tried again and again, I could write nothing. It was no good; I tore up all my attempts. By the time I had finished my preparations, I found it only wanted ten minutes to eleven. I dared not go by the carriage road, nor even straight down the garden, for fear he should meet or see me.

I stole out carrying Tib, with my hand over his mouth, lest he should hear Robert's step and bark to welcome him, and took the path that runs eastward through the wood, and joins the road higher up the valley. The night was dark but not wet, and mild for the time of year. I gained the road, and retraced my steps along it, till I stood at the garden-

gate below the house. I was safe now. As I paused there, a distant clock somewhere in the village struck eleven, and I could see a little spark of light moving up the carriage-drive. My whole soul went out to my love in a yearning good-bye which he will never hear, and then I hurried on along the road that led to the station. I found there was a train passing Abergaelau in an hour or two, and I reached Chester this morning.

I telegraphed to Virginie at once, from the station, to pack my clothes and things and come and join me here. The hotel people looked rather doubtful at a haggard woman arriving at six in the morning, with only a hand-bag and a pug-dog, but I explained to them that my maid and luggage would arrive later in the day, so they gave me a bedroom, and I have been

lying down ever since. I thought it would be a comfort to write to you. Virginie ought to be here to-night or to-morrow morning at latest, and then we shall start off again on our wanderings. Who knows whither or to what?

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